WOMAN *and* PUPPET

PIERRE LOUŸS

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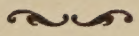
By PIERRE LOUYS

Illustrations by
WILLIAM SIEGEL



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THE WOMAN and THE PUPPET

The Carnival in Spain does not end at 8 o'clock in the morning on Ash-Wednesday, as it does in other countries. The stern calls of penance of the Church "memento quia pulvis es" (remember that thou art dust) does not influence the riotous gayety of Sevilla for more than four days, and on the first Sunday in Lent, the Carnival is revived with renewed vigor.

It is the "Domingo de Pinatas," the Sunday of the Fleshpots, the great Feast. The usually quiet little town is suddenly changed into a boisterously noisy place, where howling little street urchins are seen rushing along the narrow streets, fantastically dressed up with multicolored rags of red, blue, green, yellow, that had been mosquito-nettings, curtains, or petticoats. The children band themselves together from all parts of the town in tumultuous battalions, brandishing a colored rag at the end of a stick, by way of a "flag," and "conquering" the streets "incognito" under the mask

of some wild animal, out of which shining eyes reveal their childish joy through the two holes. "Anda, Hombre! que no me conoce" (Make way, Sir. I bet you don't know me) is their battle cry, and much amused, the grown-ups give way to this "terrible" masked invasion.

At the windows and on balconies innumerable brown heads press against each other. All the young folks from the country have come to Sevilla on that day to celebrate and see all there is to be seen, the young girls protecting their powdered little faces with fans against the cascades of small colored bits of paper that are coming down from the windows like snow. Excited shouts, screams, appeals and laughter are heard on all sides; indeed, a few thousand of these frenziedly delirious merrymakers of Sevilla are more boisterously noisy than all Paris.

The 23rd of February, 1896, was one of those Sundays de "Piñatas," and André Stévenol, a visitor from France, viewed the approaching end of the Carnival of Sevilla with some slight sentiment of ill-humour, inasmuch as that essentially amorous

week had not brought him any new adventure. From previous visits to Spain he knew with what promptitude and light-heartedness knots are tied and untied in this still primitive corner of the world and he felt sort of downhearted, because chance and opportunity had not smiled on him.

At most that a young girl with whom he had engaged in an arduous battle of serpentines from the street, up to her window, had rushed down, after signalling him, to present him with a little red bouquet of flowers with a "muchisima gracia cavayero" in Andalusian dialect. She has returned so quickly to her window and, besides, from a close look at her, he was so disillusioned, that André fixed the bouquet into his button hole, without fixing the girl into his mind and memory. Thereafter the day seemed still more empty to him. When the hour struck four from twenty nearby clocks, he left the Sierpes, passed between the Giralda and the old Alcazar, through Rodrigro Street, to Las Delicias, the Champs Elysées of magnificent shade-trees along the immense Guadalquivir river, full of vessels of all kinds.

It was here where the elegant Carnival unfolded itself. In Sevilla the better class of people is not always rich enough to have three meals a day, but they would rather fast than deprive themselves of external luxury which consists for them chiefly in the possession of a landau and two splendid horses. This little provincial town counts 1500 master-carriages, often old fashioned in shape, but rejuvenated by the beauty of the horses and, being occupied by persons of noble race and mien, nobody thinks of scoffing at the carriage.

With an effort, André Stévenol succeeded in elbowing his way through the dense crowds which lined the Avenue on either side. Child vendors offered their wares for the battle of eggs. "Quien quiere huevos?" Who wants eggs? Two perras the dozen. In yellow wicker baskets they carried hundreds of egg-shells from which the eggs had been taken out and the shells refilled with confetti and fastened together with small ribbons. These were thrown with much alacrity at the crowds and at those passing in slowly moving carriages, the occupants of which replied lustily by bombarding

the crowd, while protecting their faces with folding fans.

At the beginning of the battle of eggs, André had filled his pockets with these inoffensive projectiles and threw them with jest. It was a real fight, as the eggs, without ever hurting any one, struck nevertheless with force before breaking up into an avalanche of confetti. André threw his eggs with rather more force than necessary, once even breaking a delicate fan. Of course it was entirely out of place to come to such a fracas with a fragile fan such as are used in ball-rooms. But he continued to battle without disturbing himself about the incident.

The procession of carriages passed, some containing families, others women, lovers, children and friends. André looked at this happy multitude which passed by with gay shouts and roaring laughter in the sunshine of spring, his eyes looking deeply into other eyes full of fire and youthful charm. The girls of Sevilla do not bashfully lower their eyelids, but with grateful smiles accept the homage of admiring glances which they hold a long time.

As he had been battling already for an hour, André thought of retiring, when putting his hand into his pocket, he felt that there was just one last egg left and looking up, he suddenly saw again the young woman whose fan he had broken.

She was marvelous. Deprived of the fan which had previously protected her laughing features, she was made the butt of attack from the crowds and from passing carriages, and standing up, panting for breath, her hair undone, red from the heat of the sun and the battle, she replied gaily and vigorously.

She looked like twenty-two, but actually was only eighteen. That she was a native of Andalusia was beyond doubt. She had that admirable type of figure which comes from the mixture of Arab blood with vandals, Semites, with the Germans, and which unites exceptionally, in a small valley of Europe, all the perfections which oppose each other in the two races.

Her lithe body was all expression. One felt, that even when covering her face with a veil, one could guess her thoughts, and that she laughed

with her legs as she spoke with her torso. Such grace and such liberty is given only to women who are not immobilized during the long northern winters, spent near the fire-place. Her hair was auburn, but from a distance it looked almost black, covering her neck with a mass of curls. Her cheeks were of an extremely sweet contour and of that delicate brownish shade, almost like a Créole. The narrow rim of her eyelids was naturally dark.

André, pushed by the crowd close to the footboard of her carriage, looked at her intensely. He smiled and the rapid beatings of his heart told him that this was one of those women who would play a part in his life. It flashed through his mind that the long line of carriages which had been stopped for a moment, might move on again instantly, so, without losing any time, André moved back as far as he could, took his last egg out of his pocket and rapidly pencilled on the white shell the six letters of the word "Quiero." Then choosing an instant when the eyes of the strange girl met his, he threw his egg gently upwards, like a

rose. The young woman caught it deftly in her hand.

"Quiero" is an astonishing word which says everything. It means I will, I desire, I love; it is to want and to cherish, depending upon the tone in which it is spoken. It expresses the most impetuous passion as well as the lightest caprice. It is an order or a prayer; a declaration or a condescension. And sometimes it is an irony.

The glance with which André accompanied his projectile, simply conveyed the expression: "I would like to love you."

As if she had guessed that this shell contained a message, the girl slipped it into a little leather bag which was suspended from a holder in her carriage. Doubtless she would return it, but the moving stream of vehicles carried her away rapidly to the right and in the pressure of traffic André soon lost sight of her before he could get through the crowd to follow her.

He left the sidewalk, disengaged himself as best he could, ran up an alley, but the multitude which densely packed the Avenue did not permit

him to act quickly enough and when he succeeded in mounting a bench whence he could dominate the battle, the charming young head which he was seeking, had disappeared.

Saddened, he slowly went back through the streets. For him there was no more joy in the Carnival. He was angry with himself for the awkward clumsiness which had cut short his adventure. Perhaps, if he had been more determined, he could have found a way to get nearer to the carriage. Now she had disappeared. Would he find her again? Did she live in Sevilla? Suppose she did not, WHERE was he going to look for her? In Cordova? in Jerez? or in Malaga? The thing was impossible.

The more he thought of her, the more her image became endeared to him. Certain details of her features, which would have been hardly noticed in any ordinary person, persisted in being uppermost in his memory and became the principal motive for his tender affection. Thus he had noticed two little curls, which, instead of hanging down loosely from her temples, had been

turned with an iron into a couple of neat round loops. This was not an original fashion, many Sevillian ladies treated their curls in the same way, but perhaps the nature of their hair did not lend itself to such perfection; at all events André could not remember to have seen anything like those two coquettish little curls of his, as yet unknown, love-at-first-sight girl. Moreover, her carmine lips were of extreme mobility; they changed at every instant in form and expression, at times they were almost invisible, then again they were tantalizingly turned upwards, thick or thin, pale or dark, animated by a variable flash. Oh! you might have blamed all the rest; you might say that the nose was not exactly of Greek style, that her chin was not Roman, but anyway, not to blush at sight of those temptingly sweet cherry lips was something impossible to imagine.

His mind had arrived thus far in thinking about her, when a rude voice suddenly shouted "Cuidado," attention! and made him jump into an open doorway to avoid being run down by two horses trotting along the narrow street drawing a carriage.

And in that carriage was a young woman who, perceiving André, threw him an egg with a gentle movement of her hand, as one would throw a rose.

André, completely taken aback by this new and sudden encounter, had not made a move to catch the egg before it dropped on the ground. Fortunately it did not break, but by the time he stooped to pick up the missile, the carriage had already turned around the corner of the street.

The word "QUIERO" was still on the white shell and nothing additional was written thereon, but it showed a decided flourish which had been scratched on it with the sharp needle of a brooch, terminating the last letter of the word, as if to answer by the same word.

II.

In which the reader learns the cozy Spanish diminutives of the given name Conception.

Meanwhile, however, the carriage had once more disappeared and only the sound of the trotting horses could be heard from the direction of the Giralda.

André ran in pursuit, determined that this second occasion should not escape again, as it might be the last one. He arrived just in time to see the carriage enter through the open gates of a pink house on the Plaza del Triunfo. And the great gates closed again on a feminine silhouette, before he could reach her.

It would doubtless have been advisable to "pave" the way by making inquiries to learn something about the name, the family and their standing, rather than rush, head down, into complications which might become extremely embarrassing, since he knew nothing whatever and therefore had not even an excuse. André was, however, deter-

mined not to leave the place without making at least a first effort. With a rapid motion of the hand he smoothed down his hair, adjusted his tie and then deliberately rang the bell.

A young butler appeared behind the bars of the gate but did not open the latter: "What are the wishes of your Honor?"

"Take my card to the lady."

"Which lady?" asked the domestic in a quiet voice, quite respectfully, without a hint of suspicion.

"The one who lives here, I think."

"But what is her name?" Annoyed, André did not answer. And the butler continued: "Will your Honor please tell me to what lady he desires an introduction."

"I repeat that your mistress awaits me."

The butler bowed, shrugging his shoulders as a sign of impossibility, then turned without opening and even without taking the card.

Then André in a sudden access of anger did an impolite thing: he rang the bell loudly a second and third time as if he were at a tradesman's

door, trying to justify his action by saying to himself: "A woman who is so prompt in answering a declaration of this kind, should not be surprised at my insistence in getting to her; she was alone at the Delicias and doubtless lives here alone, and the noise I make is surely heard by her." He did not consider that the Spanish Carnival grants passing liberties, which, however, cannot be prolonged into normal life with the same chances of reception.

The gate remained closed and the house silent, as if it had been deserted. What was he to do? He promenaded some time on the Plaza in front of her windows at which he still hoped to see her face and perhaps even see some signal, but nobody appeared and he resigned himself to return. However, before leaving a door which had closed on so much mystery, he espied nearby a vendor of wax-matches, sitting in the shade and inquired:

"Who lives in this house?"

"I do not know," answered the man. André then put ten reales into his hand and said: "Tell me just the same."

"I ought not to say anything. The Señora buys from me and if she knew that I am talking about her, her servants will buy elsewhere to-morrow, at Fulano's for instance, who sells only half full match-boxes. At least I am not going to say anything detrimental, Cabayero! Nothing but her name, since you want to know it. It is la Señora Doña Conception Perez, wife of Manuel Garcia.

"Then her husband does not live in Sevilla?"

"Her husband is in Bolivia."

"Where is that?"

"Bolivia is an American Country."

As he could not get anything more out of the man, André threw another coin into the lap of the street vendor and started back to his hotel.

He was rather undecided. Even on learning that the husband was absent, he found that all the chances were not coming his way. This reserved street vendor who undoubtedly knew more than he would tell, led him to believe that there was another lover already, well installed, and the attitude of the butler was not such as to disarm his suspicion. There remained only fifteen days for

André before he was obliged to return to Paris. Would those few days be enough to ingratiate himself into the good graces of the young lady, who was apparently already fixed for life?

Thus troubled with uncertainty he entered the patio of his Hotel when the doorman approached him with: "There is a letter for your Honor." The envelope bore no address.

"Are you sure that this letter is for me?"

"It has been handed to me for Don André Stévenol."

Thereupon André opened it instantly. It contained these few lines on a blue card:

"Don André Stévenol is requested not to make so much noise, not to state his name, nor to ask for mine. If to-morrow about 3 p.m. he happens to be on the road to Empalme, he will see a carriage, which perhaps, will stop."

"How simple life is," thought André. And mounting to the first floor he had already visions of coming intimacies and tried to find sweet diminutives for the most charming of all names: "Conception, Concha, Conchita, Chita."

III

How and for what reasons André did not go to the trysting place of Concha Perez.

The next morning André Stévenol had a glorious awakening. The light of the sun poured into his room through the four large windows of his room; there were none of the noises of yesterday, no horses, no cries and shouts of vendors, no tinkling of mule's bells, no chimes from a convent to trouble this peaceful quiet.

It was a long time ago since he had felt so fine and so happy on awakening. He stretched his arms forcefully, then he pressed them against his chest as if he wanted to give himself the illusion of an expected embrace.

"How easy life is," he repeated with a smile. "Yesterday at this hour I was alone, without a purpose, without a thought. There was a promenade and lo, this morning we are two. Who wants to make us believe in refusals, in disdain, or even in making us wait? We ask and the

women are pleased to submit to our wishes. Why should it be otherwise?"

He arose, put on his dressing gown and slippers and rang the bell for the servant to make his bath ready. While waiting, he strolled to the window, put his forehead to the pane and contemplated the Plaza in full day-light.

The houses were painted with those light colors with which the Sevillians decorate their houses and which resemble a woman's gown. There were cream colors with white cornices, there were rose colors of a light fresh shade, others were water-green and orange and again others of a pale violet color. Nowhere were the eyes offended by the horrible brown of the streets in Cadiz or Madrid, nowhere was the dazzling white of Jerez.

On the Plaza itself the orange trees were heavy with fruit, fountains played, young girls laughed, holding the ends of their shawls as the Arabian women hold their "haick." And from all parts, from the corners of the Plaza, from the middle of the road, from the narrow little streets, the bells of the mules tinkled. Again André did not think that one could live elsewhere but in Sevilla.

Having finished his toilet and slowly sipped his cup of thick Spanish chocolate, he went out for a walk.

Almost unintentionally his feet carried him from the steps of his hotel to the Plaza del Triunfo, but having arrived there, he remembered the cautious advice which had been given him and be it, that he was afraid to displease his "Maitresse" by passing directly in front of her door, be it, on the contrary, that he did not wish it to appear that he was tormented by a desire to see her sooner, he followed the opposite sidewalk, without even turning his head to the left. From there he went to Las Delicias.

The battle of the previous day had covered the streets ankle deep with confetti and egg shells which gave them a vague appearance of a kitchen backyard. In certain places the sun had disappeared behind the rolling dunes. Besides, the place was empty, as Lent had recommenced again.

From an alley which lead to the country there emerged a pedestrian who came towards him and whom he recognized.

"Good morning, Don Mateo," he greeted him with an outstretched hand. "I did not expect to meet you so soon."

"What is one to do, my dear sir, when one is alone, useless and idle? I take a walk in the morning and I take a walk in the evening; in daytime I read, or play. Such is the sort of existence carved out for me. It is a dreary one."

"But you have nights which make up for the dreary days, if I am to believe the gossips of the town."

"If they still say that of me, they are mistaken. From this day down to the day of his death, no woman will ever be seen with Don Mateo Diaz. But let us speak of something else. How long are you going to stay here?"

Don Mateo Diaz was a Spaniard of about forty years, to whom André had been introduced on the occasion of his first visit to Spain. His gestures and his phrases were naturally of a declamatory style. Like many of his compatriots he attached an extreme importance to the observance of matters which were really unimportant, but this does

not imply any vanity or silliness on his part. Spanish pompousness is worn like a cape with large, elegant folds. A highly educated man, whose large fortune alone had prevented him to lead an active existence, Don Mateo was chiefly known by the history of his bedroom which passed for a hospitable place. In the face of such facts, André was naturally astonished that the Don should have renounced so early to all the temptations of the flesh: but André refrained from dwelling upon the question.

They promenaded for a time along the shore of the river, which Don Mateo, as a riverside resident and also as a patriot, never tired to praise.

"You know," he exclaimed, "that pleasantry of a foreign Ambassador who preferred the Manzanares, to any other river, because it was navigable by carriage and on horseback. Look at the Guadalquivir, the father of the plains and of the cities. I have traveled much during the last twenty years; I have seen the Ganges, the Nile and the Atrato, which are larger rivers and seen under a brighter light; but I have never seen anywhere

this majestic beauty of the current and the water. Its color is incomparable. Isn't it like shining gold that flows there underneath the arches of the bridge? The water swells like the figure of a woman who has conceived and there is plenty of water, plenty of land. It is the wealth of Andalusia which is carried from those two quays towards the plains."

They talked politics. Don Mateo was Royalist and was indignant about the persistent efforts of the opposition, at a moment when all the forces of the country should concentrate around the weak but courageous queen to help her save the supreme inheritance of an imperishable history.

"What a fall!" he exclaimed. "What a misery! Having possessed Europe, having been Charles the Fifth, having doubled the field of action of the world by the discovery of a new world, having had an empire on which the sun never sets, and better still, having, the first, beaten your Napoléon, and then to expire under the night-sticks of a handful of negro bandits! What a destiny for our Spain!"

One could not have told him that those bandits were the brothers of Washington and of Bolivar. For him they were shameless brigands who did not even deserve to be shot. He calmed down. "I love my country," he continued. "I love its mountains and its plains. I love the language and the costumes and the sentiments of its people, who have qualities of a superior race. They alone have a distinction, a nobleness, apart from Europe, ignoring all that is not Spain, which is shut off on its land, as if surrounded by a wall. It is doubtless for this reason that she declines, for the benefit of the Northern Nations in accordance with the contemporary law which to-day pushes down the weaker, by the superior force of the stronger. You know that in Spain they call 'hidalgos' the descendants of families of pure blood, free from any mixture of Moorish blood. They will not admit that during seven centuries Mahometanism has taken root on Spanish soil. So far as I am concerned I have always considered it sheer ingratitude to deny such ancestors. We owe to the Arabs those exceptional qualities which have left their

mark on the glorious history of our great past. They have bequeathed to us their disdain of money, their disdain of telling a lie, their disdain of death, and their inexprimable pride. We have from them our upright attitude towards all that is base and low, and also that laziness in regard to manual labor. In very truth, we are their sons and there is a reason why we still continue to dance their oriental dances to the sound of their 'ferocious romances' (instrumental music)."

The sun rose higher into a grandiose blue heaven. The old trees of the park showed here and there the green of the laurels and of the supple palm-trees. Sudden whiffs of heat enchanted this winter-morning of a country where the winter has no home.

"You will come and lunch with me, I hope?" said Don Mateo. "My home is right there, near the road to Empalme. In a half-hour we will be there and if you are willing, I'll keep you till evening and show you my new breeding studs, where I have some fine animals."

"It would be very indiscreet on my part," re-

plied André. "I accept the luncheon but not the excursion to the stud. For this evening I have a 'rendez-vous,' a date, which I must not fail to keep, believe me."

"A woman? Fear nothing; I won't ask any questions. You are free. I am grateful even for the time you will spend with me until the time when you must go. When I was of your age I refused to see anybody during those mysterious days. I had my meals brought up to my room and the woman I expected was the first being to whom I spoke since the moment of my awakening." He was silent for a moment, then he continued in an advisory tone:

"Ah, my friend! Beware of the women! I will not advise you to run away from them, for I have lived my life with them and if I had to live it over again, the hours which I have spent in their company, are the ones I would like to re-live once again. But—BEWARE, BEWARE of them!" And as if he had found an expression to his thought, Don Mateo added slowly:

"There are two kinds of women which we

should not desire to know at any price: First, those who do not love you, and next, those who do love you. Between these two extremities there are many thousands of charming women, but we do not appreciate them."

The luncheon would have been rather dull, if the animation of Don Mateo had not replaced the lacking conversation by a long monologue, as André, preoccupied by his own personal thoughts, listened only with half an ear to what was being said. As the moment of his tryst approached, the rapid beating of his heart which he had felt on the previous day, had started again more pressingly. It was a muffled appeal within himself, absolutely imperative, which chased from his mind everything that did not concern the expected woman. He would have given much if the hour hand of the big Empire clock on which he had fixed his eyes, could be moved fifty minutes ahead. But the minutes which one keeps counting, drag on slowly and the time did not move any faster for him than a stagnant pool.

Finally, constrained to stay till the proper time

and unable to remain silent any longer, he addressed his host in the following unexpected manner:

"Don Mateo, you have always been for me a man of excellent counsel. Will you permit me to confide a secret to you and to ask for your advice?"

"I am entirely at your disposal," replied Don Mateo, rising from the table to pass into the smoking room.

"Well, the question is this," stammered André. "Really to any one else I would not put it. . . . Do you know a Sevilla lady called Conception Garcia?"

Mateo jumped up:

"Conception Garcia! Conception Garcia! Which one? explain yourself! There are twenty thousand Garcias in Spain! It's a name as common as Jeanne Duval or Marie Lambert in your country. For the love of God tell me her maiden name. Is it P. . . , tell me, is it Perez? Concha Perez? But speak man, speak!"

André, thoroughly upset by this sudden emo-

tion, had for a moment the presentiment that it would perhaps be wiser not to tell the truth, but his tongue was faster than he intended when he said:

"Yes!"

Then Mateo, emphasizing every detail, like one sounds a wound, continued:

"Conception Perez de Garcia, 22, Plaza del Triunfo, 18 years old, almost black hair, and a mouth . . . a mouth . . ."

"Yes," said André, again.

"Ah, you have well done in speaking to me of her. You did well indeed, Sir. If I can stop you at her door, it will be a good deed on my part, and some rare good luck for you."

"But who is she?"

"What's that? Don't you know her?"

"I have met her yesterday for the first time; I have not even heard her speak."

"Then it is still time!"

"Is she a prostitute?"

"No, no. She is even, after all, an honest woman. She has had only four or five lovers,

and at the time we live in, that is almost equivalent to chastity."

"And . . ."

"Moreover, believe me, she is remarkably intelligent. Very remarkably so. Both by her wit, which is one of the finest, and by her knowledge of life, I judge her a superior being. I am not eulogizing her. She dances with an eloquence which is irresistible. She speaks as she dances and she sings as she speaks. That she has good looks, I suppose you do not doubt. And if you could see what she hides; you would say even that her mouth . . . but enough. Have I said it all?

André, rather vexed, did not reply.

Don Mateo seized him by the two lapels of his coat and underscoring every word by a short little jerk, he added:

"And she is the WORST of women, Sir. Do you hear me, Sir? She is the WORST of women on earth. I have only one hope, only one consolation in my heart and that is: that on the day of her death, God will not forgive her!"

André rose from his chair:

"Nevertheless, Don Mateo, I, who am not yet authorized to speak of this woman the way you do, I have no right not to go to this rendez-vous which she has given me. Is it necessary for me to repeat that I have made you a confidant and that I regret to interrupt yours by a premature departure?" And he extended his hand.

Mateo placed himself against the door, and exclaimed: "Listen to me, I implore you. Listen to me. A moment ago you said that I am a man of excellent advice. I do not accept this opinion. I have no need to, in order to speak to you the way I do. I even forget the affection which I have for you, which, however, ought to be sufficient to explain my insistence . . ."

"But then? . . ."

"I speak to you as man to man, like a first-comer who stops you in the street to warn you of a grave danger, I am calling out to you: 'Do not go any further, turn back, forget whom you have seen, who has spoken to you, who has written to you!' If you love peace, the calm nights, a carefree life, and all that we call happiness, do not go near Con-

cha Perez. If you do not wish that this day should divide your past from your future, in two halves, a past of joy and a future of violent agony of body and mind, do not go near Concha Perez! If you have not yet experienced the extreme madness which she is capable of engendering and maintaining in a human heart, do not go near this woman, flee from her as you would from death. Let me save you from her, have pity on yourself!"

"Don Mateo, do you love her?"

The Spaniard passed his hand over his brow and murmured: "Oh, no! All that is definitely finished. I do not love nor hate her any more. The thing is passed. Everything has an end. . . ."

"Then I would not hurt you personally if I refrain from following your advice. I would gladly make a sacrifice of this kind, but there is no reason why I should make one to myself. . . . What is your answer?"

Mateo looked at André, then changing suddenly the expression of his features said in a whimsical way: "Sir, one must never go to the first rendez-vous which a woman gives."

"And why not?"

"Because she doesn't come to keep the appointment."

André, to whom these words recalled a particular experience of his, could not help smiling.

"That is sometimes true," he said.

"Very often. And if perchance, she should at this moment be actually waiting for you, you may be sure that your absence will make her inclination for you all the more determined."

André reflected and smiled again. "That means to say? . . ."

"That without referring to any special personality, and even if the young woman in whom you are interested were called Lola Vasquez or Rosario Lucena, I advise you strongly to re-seat yourself in the easy-chair you occupied just now and not to leave it again without a very serious reason. We shall smoke cigars and sip iced syrups. This is a mixture which is not very well known in the Paris restaurants, but which is being served from one end to the other of Spanish America. You will tell me presently whether you enjoy the smoke of a Havana mixed with fresh sugar."

A short silence followed. Both had sat down by a small table on which were "puros" and round ash trays.

"And now, what are we going to speak of," asked Mateo.

André made a gesture which meant: You know very well.

"I shall begin then," said Mateo in a low voice, and the slight gaiety which he had recovered a moment ago, was replaced by a gloomy countenance.

IV.

The appearance of a little tawny person in a Polar Country.

It is three years ago, my friend; at that time I did not yet have the gray hair which you now see on my head. I was 37 years old and I believed I was only 22; at no time of my life had I felt that my youth was ebbing away and nobody had ever hinted to me that my youth was nearing its end.

They have told you that I am a petticoat chaser. That is false. I had too much respect for love to frequent the back-shops and I have rarely ever possessed a woman, whom I did not love passionately. If I were to name you those I have loved, you would be surprised of the small number. Only recently when I made from memory the easy account, the thought occurred to me that I had never had a blonde maitresse. I have always ignored these pale objects of desire.

What is true is, that love has never been for me a distraction, or an empty pleasure just to pass

away the time as it is for some folks. It has been my very life. If I erase from my memory the thoughts and actions which had a woman for a purpose, there would remain nothing but emptiness. This said in advance, I can now tell you what I know of Concha Perez.

It was three years ago, three years and a half to be exact, in winter. I was on my way home from France, on a 26th of December, in a terribly cold weather, by the express which passes southwards over the bridge of Bidassoa. The snow which was already thick at Biarritz and St. Sebastian, made the run to Guipuzcoa almost impossible. The train stopped for two hours at Zumarraga, while workmen hurriedly cleared the rails. Then the train started again only to stop a second time in the midst of the mountains and it took three hours to repair the disaster of an avalanche. During the night it recommenced to snow. The car-windows and tracks, heavily covered with frozen snow, muffled the noise of rolling train and we went along in the midst of a silence to which the element of danger gave a character of magnitude.

Next morning we stopped at Avila, where we arrived eight hours late, and we had been fasting for a whole day. I asked a conductor whether we could get off the train to have a meal. He shouted: 'Four days stop here. The trains do not pass any further.'

Do you know Avila? That is the place where to send those people who think that old Spain is dead. I had my trunks carried to an inn where Don Quichotte might have alighted. Fringed skin-pants were sitting around on fountains; and in the evening when loud voices informed us that the train was starting again, the mail-coach, drawn by black mules which took us to the station at a gallop through the snow and tried to capsize at least twenty times, must have been the same that formerly carried the subjects of King Philippe V from Burgoa to the Escorial.

What I am telling you in a few minutes, Sir, took forty hours to happen. And when around 8 o'clock in the evening, on a dark winter's night, I had to go for a second time without my dinner, I felt annoyed beyond measure. The prospect of

passing a third night in a railroad carriage in company with those sleepy four Englishmen who shared my compartment since Paris, was beyond my courage. I left my traveling bag in the netting, and taking my rug, I went to sit down in a compartment of an inferior class which was full of Spanish women.

I said a compartment, but should really say four compartments, as they were separated only by partitions, reaching only half way to the ceiling. There were women of the people, some sailors, two nuns, three students, one Gipsy and a national guardsman. It was, as you can see, a mixed public. All these people talked at the same time and at the top of their voices. I had been there scarcely a quarter of an hour and I knew already the life of my neighbors. Some folks ridicule people who tell all about themselves like that. On my part, I cannot help pitying those simple souls who feel relieved by crying out their misery into the desert.

Suddenly the train stopped. We were passing over the mountain ridge of Guadarrama of 1400

meters, altitude. Another avalanche had again barred the train, which tried to go backward, when another mass of snow came down to bar the return. And the continuous heavy down-pour of snow slowly buried the train.

This sounds like a tale from Norway that I am telling you, isn't that so? If we had been in a Protestant country, the people would have kneeled down to recommend their souls to God; but with the exception of thunderstorms, our Spaniards do not fear the sudden vengeance of Heaven. When they learned that the train was decidedly snowed up, they asked the Gipsy to dance.

And dance she did. She was a woman of about thirty years or less, rather ugly, like most women of her race, but she seemed to be electrified from her waist down to her feet. In a second we forgot about the cold, the snow, and the night. The people of the other compartments looked over the partitions to see the Gipsy. Those who were near her clapped the palms of their hands in rhythmical accompaniment of the 'flamenca' dance. It was

then that I noticed in an opposite corner, a little girl who was singing.

This one wore a pink skirt from the color of which I easily guessed that she was of the Andalusian race, as the Castillians prefer dark colors, the French black, or the German brown. Her shoulders and her budding breasts disappeared under a cream colored shawl, and to protect herself against the cold she had around her face a white comforter which was folded back over her shoulders.

The entire car knew already that she was a pupil of the San José Convent of Avila, that she was going to Madrid, to visit her mother, that she had no lover, and that she was called Concha Perez. Her voice was singularly penetrating. She sang without moving, with her hands kept under the shawl, and eyes closed. But what she sang, she had certainly not been taught by the sisters of the Convent. She selected well from amongst the coplas of four verses into which the people put all their passion. I still hear her singing with a crooning voice:

Tell me girlie, do you want me;
I beseech thee, let's see your bosom. . . .

or:

Thy mattress is like jasmin,
Thy sheets like roses white,
Thy pillows are like lilies,
And thou a rose all right.

I am only mentioning the less racy ones.

But suddenly, as if she had felt th eridicule of addressing such hyperboles to these rude creatures, she changed her repertory and now accompanied the dance only with ironical songs like the following, which I remember:

Little one with twenty lovers
(And me the twenty-first)
If they all think as I do,
You'll sleep alone to-night.

The Gipsy didn't at first know whether she should laugh or get angry. The jokers were on the side of the singer, and it was plain that this woman from Egypt did not have the spiritual faculty of witty repartee, which replaces in our modern society fistic arguments.

She clamped down her teeth and was silent. The little one, now completely reassured regarding the consequences of her skirmishing, redoubled her audacity and gaiety.

An explosion of anger interrupted her. The Gipsy lifted her shriveled fists and cried:

'I shall scratch your eyes out! I shall. . . .'

'Woe to me!' replied Concha calmly, even without lifting her eyelids. Then in the midst of a torrent of abuse, she added in the same calm voice:

'Conductor! Get me two "chulos" (bullfighter's assistants),' as if she were in front of a bull.

The entire car was enjoying the scene. 'Ole' (bravo), said the men, and the women looked at her with tender sympathy.

She was roused from her calm only once when the Gipsy used a more outrageous expression, calling her 'Fillette' (harlot).

'I am a woman,' said the little one, striking her budding breasts with her fist. Thereupon the two got at each other with veritable tears of rage.

I intervened: battles of women are something I could never stand for. They battle badly and

dangerously. They don't know the blow of the fist which knocks out, but they do know the use of their nails, which disfigure, and the use of pins which blind. They give me the creeps.

I separated them, which was not an easy thing to do. It is foolish to interfere between two enemies. But I did my best, after which they went back to their seats nervously whipping the floor with their feet in restrained fury.

When peace was restored, a tall gawky fellow, clad in the uniform of the civil guards, got up in a neighboring compartment, put his long boots across the separating partition, which also served as a backboard, glanced over the battlefield, where there was nothing more to do, and with that infallibility of the police, who always strike at the weakest, he applied to the cheek of poor little Concha a stupid and brutal slap.

Without condescending to explain this summary sentence he took the child to another compartment, climbed back into his own and gravely crossed his hands across his sword, with the satisfaction of having re-established public order.

The train started again. We passed Sainte-Marie-des-Neiges, which represented a wonderful scenery. An immense circular valley of snow, under a precipice of a thousand feet, showed at the horizon a chain of pallid mountains. The brightly shining moon was the very soul of the snowy mountains and nowhere have I ever seen her more divinely beautiful than at this wintry night. The heavens were absolutely dark. The moon and the snow alone glistened. For some moments I felt like being on a silent and fantastic train on its way to the discovery of the North Pole.

I was the only one to admire this wonderful mirage. My neighbors were already asleep. Have you ever observed, my friend, that people never look at anything that is interesting? Last year, I stopped on the bridge of the Triana, in contemplation of the most beautiful setting of the sun that I had ever seen. Nothing can give an idea of the splendor of Sevilla like such a sight. Well, I observed the pedestrians who passed by: they went about their business or talked about their troubles, but there was not one of them who turned his

head. Nobody noticed that glorious setting of the sun.

As I contemplated that moonlit night and the snowy scenery and my eyes began to get tired from the dazzling whiteness, the image of the little singer crossed my mind and I smiled thinking of her. This tawny little girl in this Scandinavian landscape was like a mandarin sitting on a fast-ice, a banana at the feet of a great white bear, something incoherent and comically odd.

Where was she? I looked over the separating partition and saw her not far from me, in fact, so close that I could have touched her. She was asleep, her mouth wide open, her hands crossed underneath the shawl, and while slumbering, her head had slipped over, resting on the arm of the neighboring nun. I was quite willing to believe that she was a woman, as she had told us herself, but she slept, Monsieur, like a six-month old baby. Almost her entire face was muffled up in her shawl, exposing only a round dark curl, eyelids closed on very long lashes, a little nose and two remarkable lips. I could not see more and yet I

lingered looking at this singular mouth, so childish and at the same time so sensual, that I doubted sometimes whether the dreamy movements of her lips were trying to find the nipple of her nurse's breast, or the lips of her lover.

It was daybreak when we passed the Escorial. Soon we entered the station and as I was taking down my valise I heard a little voice which shouted, already on the platform: 'Look, look!' pointing to the masses of snow which covered the train from one end to the other, the roofs as well as the cars, the windows, the springs, and comparing the other trains which were ready to leave the city, with ours in its lamentable condition, made people roar with laughter.

I helped her to pick up her packages. I wanted to get a porter to carry them for her, but she refused. She had six of them. Rapidly she took hold of the six parcels, putting one on her shoulder, one on her elbow and the four others in her hands. I lost sight of her.

You see, my friend, how this first encounter was insignificant and vague. It was not like the

beginning of a novel. There was more of decorum in it than anything of a heroine, but what is more irregular than an adventure of real life? This was the beginning. And I swear to you to-day, if anyone had asked me that morning about the events of that night and what would remain uppermost in my memory of those forty hours, I would have spoken of the marvelous landscape and not of Concha Perez. She had amused me for twenty minutes. Her childish figure had interested me once or twice, then I forgot all about her in the course of business affairs, which took me elsewhere, and I had no more thought of her.

V.

Where the same person reappears in different environments.

The following summer I met her again unexpectedly. I had long ago returned to Sevilla, had taken up another old 'liaison' of mine, only to break off with her.

Of this I will tell you nothing. You are not here to listen to the tale of my 'memoires' and I have, besides, no inclination to talk about my intimate souvenirs. Without the strange co-incidence which unites us to-day about a woman, I would never have mentioned this fragment of my past. Of course, this confidence will remain between you and me and the lamp post, I am sure.

In the month of August I was alone in my house, which for some years had been filled with a feminine presence. There was no extra cover on the table, the wardrobes were empty of feminine apparel, the bed was empty, silence everywhere. If you have been a lover you will understand me; it is horrible.

To escape this loneliness, I left in the morning, wandering about till evening, without a purpose, sometimes on horseback, sometimes on foot, with a gun, a cane, and a book; it even happened that I stayed overnight at an inn, to avoid going back to my empty house. One afternoon of idleness, I went to see the tobacco factory of Sevilla. It was an oppressive summer day. I had lunched at the Hotel de Paris and going along las Sierpes to the Calle San Fernando at an hour when there was nobody on the streets, except 'dogs and the French,' I felt stifled from the heat of the sun.

On arrival at the factory I entered alone, which is a favor, for, as you know, visitors are always conducted by a guide through this immense 'harem' of four thousand eight hundred women, who are almost as free from garments as they are from bashfulness.

The day was burning hot, as I said, and they took advantage to the fullest extent of the management's tolerance, which permitted them to undress as far as they liked in this torrid atmosphere in which they lived from June to September. It

is pure humanity to have established such a rule, for the temperature in those large workrooms is 'Sahara'-like, and it is charitable to give the poor girls the same freedom as is granted to coal heavers in the engine room of steamships.

The most dressed ones just had their shirts on (and they were looked upon as prudes); nearly all worked with a naked torso, having simply a linen skirt around their waist, which often barely covered the upper part of their legs. It is a mixed spectacle. There were women of all ages, child and aged, young and less young, corpulent, fat, lean or emaciated. Some of them were with child. Others gave suck to their little ones. Others were not even nubile. There were all kinds of females in this naked throng, except virgins, probably. There were also some pretty girls.

I passed along the compact rows looking right and left; some of them solicited alms, while the more cynical ones made sarcastic remarks, for the entrance of a man, without a guide, in this monster-harem, provoked various emotions. You will believe me when I say they don't mince words

when their shirt is down and they accompany their remarks with a 'beau geste' of impudence, or of simplicity, which is disconcerting, even for a man of my age. These women are as guileful as an honest woman.

I did not reply to all of them. Who can flatter himself to have had the last word with a cigarette girl? But I looked at them curiously: their nudity was difficult to reconcile with the toilsome work they were doing; their busy hands seemed to manufacture innumerable little lovers out of tobacco leaves, many making suggestive movements to me.

There is a singular contrast between the poverty of their linen garments and the extreme care bestowed upon their magnificent heads of hair. They cultivated and curled their hair with a care as if they were going to a ball and powdered themselves down to the nipple of their breasts even over the religious medals which they carry. There wasn't a one who had less then forty hairpins and a red flower in her hair. There wasn't a one who had not a little mirror hidden away in her handkerchief together with a white powder puff. One

might take them for actresses in beggar's garments.

I observed them one by one and it seemed to me that even the quiet ones showed some vanity in being looked over. I noticed some young ones who took an easy pose, as if accidentally, at the moment of my approach. I gave a few perras to those who had children, and to others, little marigold bouquets with which I had filled my pockets, and which they attached immediately to the small chain which was hanging down from their necks with a cross at the end. Believe me, there were some mighty poor anatomies in this heteroclitic crowd but they were all interesting and I stopped more than once in front of an admirable feminine body, such as one sees in Spain alone: a marvelous bosom, with firm, bulging breasts, standing out vigorously and as velvety as a fruit, covered with a brilliant skin of a light brownish shade.

I saw fifteen who were beautiful. That's a lot in five thousand women.

Somewhat tired, I was about to leave the third workroom when in the midst of the acclaims and

chatter of words I heard near me a sweet voice saying:

'Caballero, if you will give me a perra chica (1 cent) I will sing you a little song.'

I recognized Concha with perfect stupefaction. I still see her before me: she was wearing a much used shirt which sat well around her shoulders, hardly baring anything beyond her neck. She looked at me, refixing a pomegranate flower in her thick, dark hair.

'How did YOU get here?'

'The Lord knows. I do not remember.'

'But your convent in Avila?'

'The girls come in there by the door and get out by the window.'

'Did YOU leave that way?'

'Caballero, I am honest: I did not go there for fear of committing a sin. Well, give me a "real" (5 cents) and I will sing you a "Soledad" (Andalusian tune) while the forewoman is at the other end of the room.'

You may imagine how her neighbors looked at us during this dialogue. I was somewhat embar-

rassed myself, but Concha was imperturbable. I continued: 'With whom are you in Sevilla?'

'With mama.' I shuddered. A lover with a young girl is still some sort of guarantee; but a mother, what perdition.

'Mother and me, we have each our occupation; she goes to church and I go here. That's the difference in age.'

'You come here every day?'

'Almost.'

'Only?'

'Yes. Only when it does not rain, when I am not tired, and when I am not inclined to go for a walk. We enter here whenever we want to; ask my neighbors; one has to be here before noon or we are not admitted.'

'Not later?'

'Don't joke. At noon. My Lord. As if that were not already morning. There are some who do not come here on time to find the gate open in two days out of four. And, you know, for what we earn here, we might as well stay at home.'

'How much do you earn?'

'Seventy-five centimes for a thousand cigars or a thousand packages of cigarettes. As I am a fast worker, I have made a piécette, but it isn't much. Give me also a piécette, Caballero, and I will sing you a séguedille (Spanish song) which you do not know.'

I threw a Napoléon into her box and left her, pulling her by the ear.

Sir, in youth there are folks who are happy at the precise moment when luck turns, or when after climbing up-hill the road goes downhill again, or when the good season begins. That was just my case. That gold-piece thrown to this child was the fatal die of my game. My present life dates from that moment, my moral ruin, my decadence and all you see changed in my face. The story is very simple, almost common-place, except in one point: she has killed me.

I had left her and was slowly walking along the shadeless street when I heard behind me the patter of running little feet. I turned and there she was again.

'Merci, Monsieur,' she said. And I noticed that

her voice had changed. I had not considered the effect which my little gift would have on her, but now I perceived that it was considerable. A Napoléon is the equivalent of twenty-four 'piécettes,' the price of a bouquet and for a 'Cigarera' (cigarette hand) it represented the wages for a month's work. Moreover, it was a gold-piece and gold was never seen anywhere in Spain, except at the money-changer's shop-window. . . .

Without intending to, I had evoked the demon of gold. You see, she had made haste to leave behind her the packages of cigarettes at which she had been working since morning. She had quickly put on her skirt, her stockings, her yellow shawl, her fan, and, with a hastily powdered face, she had run after me and joined me.

'Come,' she continued, 'you are my friend. Take me to mama, since I am free, thanks to you.'

'Where does your mother live?'

'Calle Monteros, close by. You have been very kind to me, but you did not want to hear my singing, that's bad. And, by way of punishment, you are going to tell me one.'

'No, not that.'

'Oh, yes! I am going to whisper it to you.'

She approached my ear and said: 'You will recite this one:

"Is there one who hears us? No.
What do you wish me to tell you? Say.
Have you some other lover? No.
Will you have me as yours? Yes."

'Of course, you know, it is a song and the replies are not mine.'

'Is that really true?'

'Oh, absolutely!'

'And why?'

'Guess.'

'Because you do not love me.'

'Oh, yes. I think you are charming.'

'But, do you have a boy friend?'

'No, I have none.'

'Then it is for pity's sake?'

'I am very pious, but I have not made any vows, Caballero.'

'It is coldness then, doubtless?'

'No, Sir.'

'There are quite a few questions which I cannot ask you, my dear little one.'

'Ah! I knew you would never guess it! It isn't possible to guess.'

'What is it then?'

'I am a "mozita" (virgin).'

VI.

Where Conchita declares herself and reserves herself, and disappears.

She had said these words with such emphasis that I was put out of countenance for her.

What was there in this child's head so provoking and rebellish? What was the meaning of this decided attitude, this candid and perhaps honest glance of the eye, this sensual mouth which appeared to be as unmanageable as it was provokingly bold?

I did not know what to think, but it was perfectly plain to me that I liked her very much, that I was pleased to have found her again and that, doubtless, I was going to take every opportunity to watch her grow.

We had arrived at the door of her house, where a woman was busy unwrapping fruit from a basket.

'Buy me some oranges, please. I shall offer them to you upstairs.'

We went up. It was a disquieting house. A

woman's card, without stating a profession, was nailed to the first door. At the next one there was the card of a flower girl. From another escaped loud laughter and I began to ask myself, whether this little girl was not taking me to the commonest kind of a rendez-vous. However, the environment proved nothing, the poverty-stricken cigarette girls cannot afford to select their domicile and I do not judge people from their street signs.

On the last floor she stopped on the landing, which was bordered by a wooden balustrade, and gave three light knocks on a brown door, which opened with some difficulty.

'Mama,' said the child, 'welcome this gentleman, he is a friend.' The mother, a faded, dark woman, who still had some traces of former beauty, eyed me from head to foot, without much confidence. But the manner in which the daughter pushed the door shut, after asking me in, made it clear that there was but one mistress in this paltry place and that the 'Queen-mother' had resigned in favor of the regency.

'Look, mother, a dozen oranges; and look again: a Napoléon.'

'Jésus!' cried the old one, crossing her hands. 'And how did you earn all this?'

I explained rapidly our double encounter in the railroad car and at the factory and lead the conversation to the territory of confidences.

They were interminable.

The woman was, or said she was, the widow of an engineer, who died at Huelva. She had returned without a pension, without resources, and in four years of a meagre existence, had eaten up the savings of her husband's. In short, a history, true or false, which I had heard twenty times and which terminated in a pitiful cry of misery.

'What was I to do?' she continued. 'I, who had no trade. All I know is to manage a household and to pray to the Holy Mother of God. I have been offered a place as a door-keeper, but I am too proud to be a servant. I spend my days at church. I prefer to kiss the slabs of the choir rather than to sweep those at the door, and I expect that our Lord will have mercy on me at the last moment. Two women alone are so exposed! Ah, Caballero, there is no lack of temptations for

those who listen to them. We could be rich, my daughter and me, if we had followed in the bad ways. We would have mules and necklaces. But sin has never spent a night here. Our soul is straighter than the finger of St. John and we keep confidence in God, who knows his own.'

During this discourse, Conchita had finished in front of a mirror on the wall, the work of a pastel painter, with two fingers and some powder on her rather brown little face. She turned with a smile of satisfaction and it seemed to me that her mouth was transfigured.

'Ah,' continued the mother, 'what a worry for me when I see her leave in the morning for the factory! What bad examples they give her there! What ugly words she hears! Those girls do not blush, Caballero. One never knows where they come from when they enter there in the morning, and if my daughter were to listen to them, she would have gone away long ago.'

'Why do you let her work there?'

'Elsewhere it would be the same thing. You know very well, Sir, how it is: when two working

girls are together for a dozen hours they speak of what they should not speak for eleven hours and three-quarters, and for the rest of the time they are silent.'

'If they do nothing but speak, there isn't much harm in that.'

'He who supplies the menu, gives the appetite; what makes most young girls go wrong is the advice of the women rather than the eyes of the men. I do not trust even the gentlest one The one who carries the rosary in her hands, carries the devil in her petticoat. Neither young nor old, never any so-called friends: that is as I would wish it for my daughter. And in that factory there are five thousand.'

'Well, let her stop going there,' I interrupted.

I took out of my pocket two bills and put them on the table. Followed exclamations. Joined hands. Tears. I passed over what you will guess. But when the cries stopped, the mother shook her head and confessed that notwithstanding my generosity the child would still have to continue working there, for the sum I had given, and more, was

due for rent, to the baker, the grocer, the dealer of old clothes, etc. In short, I doubled my gift and left at once, blaming my sentiments of that day, for having listened to false modesty and calculation.

I do not deny that nevertheless I knocked again at that door. It was barely 10 o'clock next morning.

'Mama has gone out,' said Concha. 'She is making her purchases. Come in, my friend.'

She looked at me, then started to laugh.

'Well, I am very good in the presence of mama, am I not? What do you say?'

'Indeed.'

'At least, do not think that it is the result of education. I have educated myself all alone, fortunately, for my mother would have been incapable of doing it. I am honest and she boasts about it; but if I were to keep myself at the window, tempting pedestrians to come in, mama would look at me and say perhaps: Good heavens! I do exactly as I please from morning till night. It is also to my credit that I do not do everything

that gets into my head; for it is not she who would keep me back, in spite of the pretty phrases she has been telling you.'

'Then, young person, the day when a lover were a candidate, he would have to address himself to you?'

'To be sure, to me. Do you happen to know one?'

'No.'

I was in front of her in a wooden arm-chair, the left arm-rest of which was broken. I still see myself sitting in it, with the back towards the window, through which a ray of the sun fell on the floor. . .

Suddenly she sat on my knees and with both her arms around my neck, she said:

'Is that true?'

I did not answer any more.

Instinctively I had passed my arms around her, pressing with one hand the dear little head against me, but she anticipated my intention by pressing her hot lips against mine and looking at me deeply. Impulsive and incomprehensible: such as I have always known her. The abruptness of her caress

intoxicated me like a drink. I pressed her still more firmly against me. Her waist gave way to the pressure of my arm. I felt the electricity of her fresh young body and the shapely form of her legs through the thin skirt. She jumped up.

'No, no,' she said. 'Go away.'

'Certainly, but with you. Come!'

'Go with you? and where? to your house?'

'No, my friend, put that out of your head.'

I caught her again in my arms, but she disengaged herself.

'Don't touch me or I call for help, and then you won't see me again.'

'Concha, Conchita, my little one, are you mad? Listen, I came to you, as a friend, I spoke to you as I would to a stranger, then suddenly you throw yourself into my arms, and now it is me whom you accuse?'

'I have kissed you, because I love you, but you, you shall not embrace me without loving me.'

'And you believe that I do not love you, child?'

'No, I am pleasing to your sight, I amuse you, but I am not the only one, isn't that so, Caballero?

The black hair is growing on many girls and many eyes are passing along the street. There is no lack of girls at the factory, as pretty ones as myself and they are ready to listen to you. Do as you please with them; I will even give you some names if you want me to. But I am I, and there is only one I between San Roque and Triana. I am not to be bought like a doll at the Bazar and if I were taken away, one would not find me again.' Steps were heard on the staircase and she went to open the door for her mother.

'This gentleman came to inquire about your health,' said the child. 'He thought you did not look well yesterday and he had an impression that you were sick.'

I left there an hour later, extremely nervous, very much irritated and doubting whether I should ever go there again.

But alas! I did go there again not once, but thirty times. I was amorous like a young fellow. You have known these follies. What am I talking about! You are proving them to me right now, and you understand. Every time I left her room

I said to myself: 'Twenty-two hours, or twenty hours, until to-morrow, and these twelve hundred minutes never finished to go by.'

By and by I came to spend the whole day there, 'en famille.' I paid for the expenses, and even paid their debts which must have been considerable, judging from what they have cost me. This was rather a recommendation and there were no whisperings about it in the neighborhood. I persuaded myself readily that I was the first friend of these poor, solitary women.

To be sure, I did not have any trouble in becoming the friend of the family, but is a man ever surprised about the facilities he obtains? A suspicion would have put me on my guard at which, however, I did not stop to think: I mean the absence of mystery and constraint so far as I was concerned. There was never a moment when I could not enter their room. Concha, always affectionate, but always reserved, did not even try to prevent me from witnessing her toilet. Often I found her still in bed when I called in the morning, as she was getting up late since she did not

go to work any more. Her mother went out and she, drawing up her legs in bed, invited me to sit down near her joined knees. We talked. She was impenetrable. I have seen at Tangier, Moorish women in costume, who hid everything, leaving only their eyes naked, but looking at them, I could see to the very bottom of their soul.

Concha, on the contrary, did not hide anything, neither her life nor her shapely figure, but I felt that there was a wall between her and me.

She seemed to love me. Perhaps she did. Even to-day I don't know what to think. To all my ardent entreaties she replied cooly with a 'later,' which I could not break. I threatened her that I would go away, to which she simply answered: Go then. I threatened her with violence to which she replied: 'You will never be able to do that.' I showered presents on her: she accepted them, but always with a reserved gratefulness.

Nevertheless, when I entered her room, there was a light in her eyes, which was not artificial.

She slept nine hours at night and three hours in the middle of the day. Beyond this she did

nothing. When she got out of bed, she put on a dressing gown, and immediately slipped down again on a fresh straw-mat with two pillows under her head and one under the small of her back. I could not induce her to occupy herself with anything. Neither needle-work, nor a play, nor a book, was ever touched by her hands, since the day she quit the factory, through my fault. Even household work did not interest her. Her mother took care of the rooms, the beds, and the kitchen and every morning she spent a half hour combing the heavy hair of my little friend, usually still half asleep. Once during an entire week she refused to leave the bed. Not because she was ailing, but because she had discovered that if it was useless to go for a walk without a purpose, it was still more useless to make three steps in the room or to quit the bed, or the straw mat, where she had no need to put on the customary street costume. All our Spanish women are like that: seeing them in public there is fire in their eyes, their voice is enchanting, the quickness of their movements seem to spring from a source of perpetual eruption and

yet, as soon as they are alone, their life is idled away in a continuous rest which is their great voluptuous charm. They lie down on a couch in a room with drawn blinds; they dream of the jewelry which they might have; of the palaces in which they might live, of the unknown lovers, whose cherished weight they would like to feel on their bosom—and thus the time flies.

By her ideas of daily duties, Concha was essentially Spanish. But I don't know from what country she drew her conception of love. After twelve weeks of assiduous care and attention, I still found in her smile, the same promises and the same resistances.

One day, at last, unable to suffer any longer this perpetual attention and preoccupation, day in, day out, which troubled my life to the point of making it useless and empty for the three months which I had led that kind of existence, I took the old woman aside and talked to her with my heart in my mouth, in the most insistent manner.

I told her that I loved her daughter, that I had

the intention of uniting my life to hers, that for reasons readily understood, I could not accept any legal ties, but that I was resolved to share with her a deep and exclusive love, to which she could take no exception. I wound up with:

'I have reason to believe that Conchita would love me, but that she distrusts me. If she does not love me, I do not wish to impose myself upon her, but if the only thing that keeps us apart is leaving her in doubt, please persuade her.'

In return, I assured her not only of her present mode of living, but also of a personal fortune in future. And in order to leave no doubt about the sincerity of my engagements, I handed to the old woman a very big bundle of banknotes, urging her to use her motherly influence to assure the child that she would not be deceived.

More excited than ever, I went home. That night I could not sleep. For hours I walked across the patio of my house during a wonderful night which was already fresh, but this was not sufficient to calm my nervous excitement. I formed projects without end to find a solution which I wanted

to be a happy one. At sunrise I cut three massive clumps of flowers and had them strewn about along the alley, on the stairway, on the entrance steps to make, for her coming to me, an avenue of purple and saffron. I imagined standing against a tree, sitting on a bench, lying on the lawn, leaning against the railing, or lifting her arms upwards to the sun until they reached the bough of a tree laden with fruit. The very soul of the garden and of the house had taken the form of her body.

And now, after an entire night of insupportable waiting and after a morning which dragged along as if it would never end, I received around eleven o'clock by mail, a letter of a few short lines. You may believe me, I still know them by heart. This is what she said:

'If you had loved me, you would have waited. I intended to give myself to you; but you asked that I should be sold to you. You will never see me again. 'Conchita.'

Two minutes later I was on horseback and the noon hour had not yet arrived, when I reached

Sevilla, almost suffocated from the heat and anxiety. I ran rapidly upstairs, I knocked twenty times at the door. All remained silent.

At last a door opened behind me on the same landing, and a neighbor explained at length that the two women had left in the morning in the direction of the railroad station, with their packages, and that nobody even knew what train they had taken.

'Were they alone?' I inquired.

'All alone.'

'No man with them? Are you sure?'

'Jésus! I have never seen any other man with them but you.'

'And they have left nothing for me?'

'Nothing. If I understood correctly, they are at loggerheads with you.'

'But will they return?'

'The Lord alone knows. They did not say.'

'They must surely come back to get their furniture.'

'No. The apartment is let furnished. All that belonged to them they have taken away. And now, Sir, they are far away by this time.'

VII.

Autumn passed. The winter also went by entirely, but not a single detail escaped from my remembrance and never in all my life did I ever go through such a disastrous time than those few miserable months.

I had dreamed of beginning a new existence; I had thought of fixing for a long time to come, perhaps for ever, my amorous connections, and everything had crumbled down to nothing just before the wedding night. In my memory there was not even an hour of veritable union with this little girl; no, not a single bond, not a single accomplished thing, nothing to console me in the vain thought that, if I did not have her any more, at least I had had her and that nothing could take away from me this fact. . . .

And yet, I loved her! Oh! my God, how I loved her. I had come to think that she was in the right and that I was to blame for having conducted myself like a country-bumpkin with this

legendary virgin. I vowed to myself, that if ever I should see her again, if heaven would grant me that favor, I would remain at her feet, until she would make a sign of love to me, even if I should have to wait for it for years. I would never importune her again: I understand how she feels. She considers that she is in the position where one takes one's equal as a mistress by the month, and she does not want to be treated in a way that is inferior to her character. She wants to test me, to be sure of me, and when she gives herself, she does not want to 'loan' herself. All right, I'll be as she wants me to be. But, shall I ever see her again? And this thought immediately put me back into my distressing mood.

Then I saw her again.

It was one evening in spring. I had spent some hours at the Theatre del Duque, where the perfect 'Orejón' played several parts, and leaving there in the silence of the night, I had promenaded for a long time in the spacious and deserted Alameda.

I returned alone, smoking, through the Calle Trajoano, when I heard a voice gently calling my

name at the sound of which I trembled all over, for I had recognized the voice.

'Don Mateo!'

I turned around and saw nobody. I was surely not yet dreaming. . . .

'Concha!' I cried, 'where are you?'

'Hush! Will you keep quiet. You are going to wake up mama.'

She spoke to me from a barred window, the sill of which was about at the height of my shoulders. I saw her, in night costume, her arms covered by a light shawl, her elbows leaning on the marble sill behind the iron bars.

'Well, my friend, so this is the way you have treated me,' she continued at a low voice.

I was incapable of defending myself. . . .

'Bend down,' I told her. 'A little more, please, Honey, I can't see you in the dark. A little more to the left, where the moon shines.'

She complied silently and I looked at her in absolute intoxication for a time, I don't know how long. Then I said: 'Give me your hand.'

She passed her hand through the bars and I

pressed my feverish lips on the tips of her fingers, on the hand and along her naked and warm arm. I was mad. Stark, craving mad. You wouldn't believe it. It was her skin, her flesh, her maidenly odor; it was her all in all which I held there under my burning kisses, after innumerable nights of sleeplessness!

I said again: 'Give me your lips.'

But she shook her head and withdrew her hand.

'Later.'

Oh! this word. How many times had I heard it already and there it was again, the very first time we met again, like a barrier between us.

I pressed her with questions. 'What have you been doing? Why this precipitate departure?' If she had spoken to me, I would have obeyed. But to leave like that, after a simple letter and so cruelly!

She replied: 'It is your fault.'

I agreed. I don't know what I wouldn't have confessed, or agreed to. I was silent.

And yet, I wanted to know. What had become of her in all these long months? Where had she

come from? Since when was she in this house with the barred windows?

'We went first to Madrid, then to Carabanchel, where we have relatives. From there we came back here and here I am.'

'You inhabit the whole of the house?'

'Yes. It is not big. Still, it is large for us.'

'And how have you been able to rent it?'

'Thanks to you. Mama has made economies on all you gave her.'

'That won't last for ever. . . .'

'We still have enough to live here decently for a month.'

'And then?'

'And then? Do you really believe seriously, my friend, that I shall be embarrassed?'

I did not reply, but I would have killed her with all my heart.

She continued: 'You do not understand. If I wanted to remain here, I would know how to do it, but who says that I insist on it? Last year I have slept for three weeks under the walls of the Macarena. I lived there, on the ground, almost at

the corner of the Calle San Luis, you know, at the spot where the "sereno" is. He is a brave man, he would not have permitted any one to approach me during my sleep and never anything happened to me, except word-adventures. I can return there to-morrow; I know my tuft of grass, it isn't at all bad, believe me. In daytime, I would work in the factory or elsewhere. I know how to sell bananas, I am sure. I can knit a shawl, I can plait underwear ornaments, compose a bouquet, dance the flamenco and the sevillana. Never fear, Don Mateo, I can take care of myself.'

She spoke to me at a low voice and yet I could hear everyone of her words on the empty street, full of moonlight.

I did not listen so much, but rather kept observing the double line of her cherry lips. Her voice was as clear as the chime of church-bells of a convent.

Still leaning on her elbows, her right hand thrust into her heavy hair, upholding the head with the fingers, she continued with a sigh:

'Mateo, I will be your mistress the day after to-morrow.'

I trembled:

'You are not sincere.'

'I am telling you.'

'Then why so late, why wait still more, Honey? If you consent, if you love me. . . .'

'I have always loved you.'

'Why not right now at this hour? Look how the bars are distant from the wall. I could easily pass between them and the window.'

'You shall pass Sunday night. To-day I am blacker with sin than a gypsy; I do not want to become a woman in this state of damnation. My child would be cursed, if I conceive from you. To-morrow I shall tell to my confessor all I have done since during the last week and even that which I am going to do while in your arms, so that he might give me the absolution in advance: that is safer. On Sunday morning I shall communicate at the high-mass and when the body of our Lord is within me, I shall ask him that I may be happy in the evening and loved during the rest of my life. Amen.'

Yes, I know. This is a strange kind of religion,

but our Spanish women do not know any other. They firmly believe that heaven has an inexhaustible source of indulgences for the amorous ones, who go to Mass, and that, where necessary, heaven will favor them, protect their bed, exalt their bosom, provided they do not forget to confess their secrets. What if they were right? How much chastity would be bemoaned, during eternal life, for the missed pleasures during the worldly life?

'Well, now,' continued Concha, 'leave me, Mateo. You can see that my room is empty. Do not be impatient or jealous, because of me. You will find me there, my love, Sunday evening, late in the night; but you must promise me first, that you will not tell my mother and that you will leave in the morning, before she wakes up. It is not because I am afraid to be seen: I am my own mistress, as you know; nor do I need her advice, neither for you, nor against you. Do you swear?'

'As you wish.'

'All right. Be bound by this.'

And turning down her head, she put the curls

of her splendid hair through the bars, like a wave of perfume. I took them into my hands, pressed my lips to them and buried my face into this dark and warm wealth of hair. . . .

Then it escaped through my fingers and she closed the window.

VIII.

Where the reader begins to understand who is the puppet of this story.

Two interminable mornings, two days and two nights followed. I was happy, suffering and agitated at the same time. I believe that these contradictory sentiments were dominated by joy, a troubled and almost painful joy.

I can say, that during these forty-eight hours, I imagined a hundred times 'what was going to happen,' the scene, the words, and the silent ecstasy. Mentally I went through the eminent role which awaited me. I saw myself with her in my arms. And from one-quarter of an hour to another quarter of an hour, the identical scene was lived through again and again, with all the sweet details which my imagination could invent.

At last the hour came. I slowly walked the street, not daring to stop underneath her window, for fear to compromise her, and yet vexed at the thought that perhaps she was standing behind

those blinds, keeping me waiting in a suffocating agitation.

'Mateo!'

She had called me at last.

At that moment of my life, Sir, I was fifteen years old. The twenty years of love behind me evaporated like a dream. I had the absolute illusion that my lips were going to glue themselves for the first time to the lips of a woman and that I would feel a lithe young body caress me and press against me. Stepping on a corner stone with one foot and with the other against the bent window-bars, I entered like a theatrical lover. I almost smothered her with kisses.

She was standing and in an eager embrace abandoned herself and then again tensed herself at the same time. Our two heads were joined by the mouth and breathing heavily through the nose; with eyes closed, we stood there in passionate excitement. I had never understood the veritable meaning of the 'intoxication of a kiss.' In that state of giddiness, wildness and unconsciousness in which I found myself, I didn't know, nor care,

who we were, in what place we were, or what became of us. The present was so intense that the future as well as the past entirely disappeared for the moment. She moved my lips with hers, she burned with desire in my arms and I felt her little belly through her petticoat, pressing against mine with a lustful and ardent caress.

'I am feeling unwell,' she murmured. 'I entreat you, wait. I think I am falling. . . Come to the patio with me, I will lay down on the mat . . . wait . . . I love you . . .but I am almost swooning.'

I went towards a door.

'No, not that one; that is mama's room. Come this way, I'll guide you.'

The patio was illuminated by the star-lit heaven on which blue clouds went their way. One side of the patio was brightly lit up by the moon, while the rest of the court was in a confidential shade.

In oriental fashion, Concha lay down on the mat. I sat down near her and she took my hand.

'My friend,' said she, 'will you love me?'

'How can you ask?'

'How long a time will you love me?'

I am afraid of these questions which all women put and to which one can only reply with banalities.

'And when I shall be less pretty, will you still love me? . . . and when I am old, quite old, you will even then still love me? Tell me, sweetheart. Even if it were not true, I want to hear you say it; and it will give me strength. You see I have promised myself to you for to-night, but I don't know at all whether I shall have the courage . . . I don't even know whether you merit it. Ah! Holy mother of God! if I were deceived in you, it seems to me that my whole life would be lost. I am not one of those girls who go to Juan and to Michael and from there to Anthony. After you, I shall never love another and if you leave me, I shall be like dead.

She bit her lips with an oppressed wail, staring into space, but the movement of her mouth finished by smiling again. 'I have grown in the last six months. My last summer's dresses already are too tight across my chest. Open this one and see how beautiful I am.

If I had asked her to do this, she would, doubtless, not have permitted it, and I began to doubt that this night would be at all a lover's night, so I did not touch her. But she came nearer to me, and . . . the breasts which I brought to light in opening this swell corsage, were the fruits of the promised land. If there ever were any breasts as beautiful, I do not know. I never saw even her own comparable in form, as lovely, as they were on that night. Breasts are living things which have their infancy and their decline. I am firmly convinced that I saw these at the very moment of their highest perfection.

Meanwhile, she had taken from between her breasts a scapular which was brand new and which she kissed piously, watching my emotion from the corner of her half closed eyes.

'Then you think I am lovely?'

I took her again into my arms.

'No, later!'

'What, again later? What is the matter now?'

'I am not disposed, that is all.' And thereupon she buttoned up her corsage.

I suffered indeed indescribably. Now I supplicated her with bluntness, fighting her hands, which had again become protective. I would have cherished and maltreated her at the same time. Her obstinacy in tempting and repulsing me, this circus which had gone on already for a year and redoubled at the supreme moment, exasperated my most patient affection.

'My little one,' I told her, 'you are playing with me, be careful that you do not overdo it.'

'Ah, is that so. Very well, Don Mateo, I am not going to love you even to-night. Bye, bye, till to-morrow.'

'I shall not come again.'

'You will be back to-morrow!'

Furious, I took my hat and left her, determined never to see her again.

I kept this resolution until the hour when I fell asleep, but my awakening was lamentable.

Oh, what a day! I well remember it.

In spite of my resolution, I took the road to Sevilla. I was attracted to her by an invisible power; I believed that my will-power had ceased to

exist, that I could not even decide the direction my feet were to take.

During three hours of fever and battling with myself, I wandered along the Calle Amor de Dios, back of the street in which Concha lived, always on the point of running across the twenty paces which separated me from her. . . . Finally, with a supreme effort, I turned, almost running towards the country, without even knocking at the window of my beloved one, but what a miserable triumph it was!

The following day she came to me.

'Since you did not want to come to me, it is me who comes to you,' was her greeting. 'Do you still say that I do not love you?'

Sir, I would have thrown myself at her feet.

'Quick, show me your room,' she added. 'I will not have you accuse me of indifference to-day. Do you think I am not impatient myself? You would be very much surprised if you knew what I think.'

But as soon as she entered my room, she started again: 'No, not this one. There have been too many women in this ugly bed. This is not the

room fit for a "mozita" (virgin). Let us take another one, a guest-room, that does not belong to any one. Will you?'

So there was another hour of waiting, to open the windows, to sweep the room, to put new sheets on the bed. . . .

At last all was ready and we went upstairs.

I was hoping against hope that this time I was going to succeed; in fact, I didn't dare to hope, but at least, it looked like coming true. Alone, with me, in my home, without protection against my sentiments, which were so well known to her, it seemed improbable that she would have risked coming here, without making at least in thought, the sacrifice which she pretended to offer me.

As soon as we were alone she took off her mantilla, which was attached with fourteen needles to her hair and to her corsage; and then very simply, she undressed herself. I admit, instead of helping her, I rather delayed this long process, interrupting her twenty times in order to put my lips on her naked arm, on her round shoulders, on her firm breasts, on her brown neck. I watched her body

slowly appear bit by bit, to the limit of the last garment and I persuaded myself that this young rebel was going to give herself up this time.

'Well? Have I kept my promise?' she asked, pressing her shirt against her waist as if she wanted to rub her lithe body. 'Please pull down the blinds, there is too much light in this room.'

I obeyed, and meanwhile she lay down silently in this large bed.

I saw her behind the white mosquito-netting like a theatrical scene, behind a sheet of gauze. . . .

What shall I tell you, Sir? You have guessed already that this time again I was ridiculed and played with. I have told you that this girl was the worst of women and her cruel inventions surpassed all limits; but up till now you do not yet know her fully. Only now, in listening to my sorry tale from scene to scene, you will know who and what Concha Perez is.

She had said, that she had come to me to abandon herself to me. You have heard her words of love and of promise. Up to the last moment she played the amorous virgin, who is going to

know the joy, which a young married woman feels in delivering herself up to a husband; a young married woman, without ignorance, I admit, but excited and earnest.

Well, in dressing herself at home, this miserable little creature had put on a sort of athletic pants of strong canvas cloth, so thick and hard, that even an ox could not have pierced it with his horn. This was laced tightly around the upper part of her legs and around her waist, making an inattackable combination. And that is what I discovered in the midst of my most ardent excitement while this wicked young scelerat calmly explained: 'I will be foolish as far as God permits, but not as far as men want me to.'

For a moment I considered whether I should strangle her, then—and I admit that I'm not ashamed to confess it—my face dropped into my hands in tears.

What I was crying for, Sir, was my own youth, of which this child had just proved me the irreparable crumbling down. Between twenty-two and thirty-five years there are atrocious affronts which

all men avoid. I could not believe that Concha would have treated me like that, if I had been ten years younger. These sail-cloth pants, this barrier between love and myself, I imagined would henceforth be between me and every woman, or at least they would want to put it on before they came near me.

'Go!' I said. 'I understand.'

But she alarmed herself suddenly. Putting her vigorous little arms around my neck, which I had difficulty in repulsing, she said, trying to find my lips:

'Dear heart, you don't appreciate all I am giving you to-day of myself? You have my breasts, you have my lips, you have my shapely legs, you have my pleasantly odorous hair, you have my body in your embrace and my tongue in my kisses. Isn't all this enough yet? Then it is not me whom you love, but only that which I refuse you? All women can give it to you, why do you ask it of me, who resists? Is it because you know I am a virgin? There are others, even in Sevilla, I swear to you, Mateo, I know some. Alma mia!

(my soul) Sangre mia! (my blood) love me as I wish to be loved, little by little, and have patience. You know I am yours and that I keep myself for you alone. What more do you want, dearest?'

It was agreed that we should see each other either at her house, or at mine, and that everything should be as she wished. In exchange for a promise on my part, she consented that she would not put that terrible cuirass of sail-cloth on again, but that was all I could obtain from her, and in the first night when she did not have it on, it seemed to me that my torture was all the more heightened. This then was the degree of servitude to which this child had brought me. (I pass over the perpetual demands for money which interrupted her conversation and to which I always gave in; but, even without mentioning this, the nature of our relations were of a peculiar interest.) Every night I held in my arm the naked body of a fifteen year old girl, who certainly, had been at least partly educated by the Convent-sisters, but whose condition of soul was such as to exclude every idea of corporal virtue—and this girl, who,

by the way, was as ardent and as full of passion as any man could desire, behaved towards me, as if nature herself had prevented her from ever satisfying her desires.

A valid excuse for such a comedy was never given, none existed. You will guess the reason later on, but meanwhile I continued to bear up with that sort of treatment.

And do not be mistaken, young Frenchman, reader of novels, and perhaps actor of special intrigues with semi-virgins who display their charms in watering places, our Andalusians have neither the taste nor the intuition of artificial love. They are admirable lovers, but they have too much common sense to stand for the mad thrills of a superfluous songstress.

Between Concha and myself, nothing happened, nothing. And you will understand what 'nothing' means. This state of things lasted for fully two weeks.

On the fifteenth day, after she had received the previous evening a sum of one thousand Douros, to pay the everlasting debts of her mother,—I found the house empty.

IX.

Where Concha Perez makes her third transformation.

This was too much. Now I saw clearly through that profligate little soul. I had been mystified like a college-boy and was more confused than sorry.

Erasing from my past life this perfidious creature, I made an effort to forget her from one day to another, by an exercise of will-power, one of those paradoxical intentions of which women always discount the fatal miscarriage.

I left for Madrid, decided to take for mistress the first young woman that seemed attractive to me.

It is the classic stratagem, which everybody invents but which never succeeds.

I went from parlor to parlor, from theatre to theatre, and finished by meeting an Italian dancer, a big girl, with muscular legs, who would have made a fine animal in some Turkish harem, but

who did not suffice in regard to those qualities which one expects to find in a unique and intimate girl-friend.

She did her level best: she was affectionate and easy. She taught me vices that are practised in Naples, of which I had no knowledge, and which pleased her more than me. I saw that she was trying hard to keep me with her, and the care for her material existence, was not the only motive for her tender and ardent zeal.

Alas! Why couldn't I love her? There was nothing I could reproach her with. She was neither unfaithful, nor troublesome. She did not seem to notice my faults. She did not set me at variance with my friends. In short, her jealousies, however frequent they may have been, could only be guessed at, but she never expressed them, nor ever quarrelled. She was an invaluable woman. But I felt nothing for her.

For two months I constrained myself to live with Giulia under the same roof, to breathe the same air, in her room, in the house which I had rented for us in the Calle Lope de Vega. She

came and went out, she walked in front of me, and I did not even follow her with the eyes. Her underwear, her dancing costume, her pants and her shirts were messing about on the sofa, on the couch, on the bed: I was not at all attracted by their influence. During sixty nights I saw her sleek body stretched out alongside of mine, in a bed which was too hot, and in which I imagined to embrace another girl, as soon as the lights were extinguished.

I came back to Sevilla. My house seemed desolate. I left again for Granada, where I annoyed myself, for Cordova, which was hot and deserted. For glittering Jerez, full of the odor of the wine-cellars; for Cadiz, an oasis of villas at the seashore.

All along these journeys, Sir, I was guided from town to town, not by my fancy, but by an irresistible and remote fascination of which I do not doubt any more than I do of the existence of God. Four times, in various places of Spain, I had met Concha Perez. This was not merely a succession of accidents. I do not believe that destinies are governed by the throw of a die. It was necessary

that this woman take me again in hand and that I had to live through what you are going to hear about. And indeed, it all happened!

* * * * *

It was at Cadiz. I entered one evening at a dance hall. She was there. She danced, Sir, in front of some thirty fishermen, as many sailors, and some stupid strangers.

As soon as I saw her, I trembled all over. I must have been as pale as a sheet; I had neither breath, nor strength. I sat down on the first seat, near the door, and elbows on the table, I watched her from the distance like one that had been resuscitated.

She danced continually, gasping for breath, excited, her face purple and her breasts dancing a tattoo of their own in accompaniment of a pair of castanets, of which she had one in each hand. I am sure that she had seen me, but she did not look at me. She finished her 'bolero' (a Spanish dance) with a movement of furious passion, the provocation of her legs and of her body being

directed at hazard to someone in the throng of spectators.

Suddenly she stopped, in the midst of a great clamor. 'Que Guapa!' (how beautiful) cried the men. 'Ole, ole little one, ole, ole (bravo), encore, encore.'

And the hats were thrown on the stage; the whole room was standing up in excitement. She bowed, still out of breath, with a little smile of triumph and disdain.

According to custom, she came down from the stage into the midst of the spectators, while another dancer succeeded her behind the footlights. And knowing that there was in one corner of the room a human being who adored her, who would have made himself a footstool for her feet in view of the whole world and who suffered intensely to the point of crying out aloud, she went from table to table, and from arm to arm, before his eyes. Everybody knew her by her name. I heard shouts of 'Conchita' which caused cold chills to run over me from the great toe up to my neck. They gave her a drink, they touched her naked arms; she put

a red flower into her hair, which a German sailor had given her; she pulled the pig-tail of a 'bandillero' (steerfighter) who behaved in a silly manner; she feigned voluptuousness for a fat young fellow, who was sitting there surrounded by women; and she patted the cheek of a man, whom I would have killed.

Of the gestures she made during this atrocious walk around the tables, not one has escaped my memory.

Recollections like those fill the past of a human existence. She called at my table last of all, because I was at the end of the Hall; but she came. Confused?—or playing the part of being surprised?—Oh, not at all. You don't know her yet. She sat down facing me and clapping her hands to call the waiter she said: 'Tonio! A cup of coffee.'

Then, with an exquisite calm, she stood my reproachful look. I said to her, lowering my voice:

'Have you no fear of anything, Concha? Are you not afraid to die?'

'No! And it is certainly not YOU, who is going to kill me.'

'You challenge me to do it?'

'Right here, or wherever you want to try the experiment. I know you, Don Mateo, as if I had borne you nine months. You will never even touch a hair on my head, and, you are right, because I don't love you any more.'

'You are so bold as to pretend that you ever loved me?'

'Believe what you like. You have only yourself to blame.'

Thus it was she, who made accusations to me. I might have expected a comedy like that.

'Twice,' I continued, 'twice you have played me that trick. What I gave you from the bottom of my heart, you took like a thief, and left me without a word, even without a letter and without telling anyone to bring me your goodbye. What have I done to merit a treatment of that kind?'

And I repeated between my teeth:

'Miserable wretch! Miserable wretch!'

But she had an excuse ready, as usual, and replied:

'What you have done? You have deceived me. Didn't you swear to me that I was safe in your arms and that you would let me choose the night of my sin? The last time has escaped your memory, has it? You thought I was asleep; you thought I felt nothing. I was awake, Mateo and I understood that if I passed another night in your bed, I couldn't dare to close my eyes without running the danger of being attacked in my sleep. That is why I fled.'

It was ridiculous and I shrugged my shoulders.

'So, that is what you reproach me with,' I told her, 'in the face of the kind of life you are leading here and the sort of men who slip into your bed?'

She got up in a furious rage, crying:

'That is not true! I forbid you to say anything like that, Don Mateo! I swear to you on the grave of my father, that I am a virgin, like a child, and I detest you, because you have doubted it.'

I was alone again. A few minutes after that, I left also.

X.

Where Mateo sees an unexpected sight

All night I walked the streets. The never-failing salt air from the sea cooled down my feverish condition and I felt by and by like a coward. Yes, I did feel cowardly in the presence of that woman, and I was ashamed of my weakness. Indeed I blushed for shame in thinking of her and of me; I called myself the most outrageous names you can address to any man. And I was afraid that on the morrow, I would richly deserve all those ugly names. After what had happened, I had the choice of three ways out: either leave her, force her, or kill her.

I took the fourth alternative, which was to submit. Each evening I came back to my place, like a submissive child, just to look at her and wait.

Little by little she softened down, which means to say that she was getting less angry with me, for all the terrible tricks she had done me. Behind the scene there was a large room where the

mothers and sisters of the dancers waited in somnolent attitudes, to take them home, after the show was over. As a special favor, Concha permitted me to wait there, in that 'attractive' company.

The hours which I have spent there count amongst the most lamentable ones. You know me: truly I never frequented cheap cabarets, elbowing the table for hours at a stretch. My own conduct made me shudder.

The Señora Perez was there, like the rest of them. She did not seem to know anything of what had happened at the Calle Trajano. Or did she also lie? It did not even bother me. I listened to her confidences and paid for her liquor. . . . Let me stop speaking of her.

My only moments of pleasure were the four dances of Concha. During her performance I stood at the open door through which she entered on the scene, watching her every movement, rarely turning her back to the public, so that I had the momentary illusion that she was facing me alone.

Her triumph was the 'flamenca.' What a dance, Sir! What a tragedy! It is the entire story of

passion in three acts: Desire, seduction, delight. No dramatic work ever expressed female love with such intensity, the gracefulness and the fury of the three scenes, one after another. Concha was incomparable. Do you understand?

Do you know the gist of the drama which it represents? To any one who has not seen it a thousand times, I would have to explain it yet. It is said that it takes eight years to learn a 'flamenca' (Spanish dance) with the precocious maturity of our women. At the age when they know how to dance, they are already no longer pretty. But Concha was a born flamenca; she did not have to have the experience: she had more, she had the gift of divination. You know how the flamenca is danced in Sevilla. You also know our best Prima Ballerinas; none of them dances it to perfection. Try and find an opera dancer who will consent to dance for twelve minutes at a stretch! And to play, so to speak, three parts in one: The amorous girl, the frank and artless one, and the tragedian. One has to be sixteen years old to play the second part, in which now Lola Sanchez is

famous for her marvelously sensuous gestures and enticing attitudes. One has to be thirty years old to play the last part of the drama, in which the Rubia, in spite of her wrinkles, is still excellent every evening.

Conchita is the only woman whom I have seen perform this terrible task with consummate skill in all three parts.

I always see her, advancing and retracing with little, well balanced steps, looking sideways underneath her uplifted sleeve, then, with a movement of her body and hips, lowering her arm, above which emerge two dark eyes. I see her delicate figure, with eyes now glowing spiritually, now bathed in languidness, tapping the floor with hollow heels, or snapping her fingers at the end of a gesture, as if she wanted to give the scream of life to each of her waving arms.

I see her still: leaving the stage in a state of excitement and lassitude, which made her still more beautiful. Her ruddy face was covered with perspiration, her brilliant eyes, her trembling lips, her agitated young breasts, all this gave her an expres-

sion of exuberance and young vivacity; in a word, she was resplendent.

For a month our relations remained like that. She tolerated me in the room behind the scene. I did not even have the right to accompany her to her door and I was allowed to remain near her only on condition that I did not make her any reproaches, neither on her past, nor on the present. As regards the future, I don't know what she thought of it; I myself had not the faintest idea of a solution for this pitiful adventure.

I knew vaguely that she lived with her mother, in a unic suburb of the town, near the plaza de Toros, a large white and green house, which sheltered also the families of six other balerinas. What happened in such a 'city' of women, I did not dare to imagine.

And yet, our dancers live a well regulated life: from 8 o'clock at night till 5 a.m. they are on the stage; they get home at daybreak, tired out, they sleep, often alone, till about the middle of the afternoon. So there is only the end of the day which they might abuse, and then there is always

the fear of a ruinous pregnancy which holds these poor girls back, who, besides, could not be induced every evening to add to the fatiguing efforts of a tiresome night.

Nevertheless I could not think of it without uneasiness. Two of Concha's friends, two sisters, had a younger brother who lived with them in their room, or in that of neighbors, exciting jealousies of which I was several times a witness.

He was called the 'Morenito' (the little brown one). I never knew his real name. Concha called him to our table, feeding him at my expense and taking my cigarettes to put them between his lips.

To all my movements of impatience she replied by shrugging her shoulders, or by icy phrases which made me suffer all the more.

'Morenito belongs to all. If I took him for a lover, he would belong to me only, like my ring, and you would know it, Mateo.'

To this I said nothing, besides, it was whispered about that Concha's private life was unassailable and I rather preferred to believe it as such, than accept any rumors that had no foundation. No

man ever approached her with that particular behavior of a lover, who meets in public his wife of the night before. I had quarrels on her account with pretenders, to whom I was, doubtless, a hindrance, but never with any one who boasted to have known her. Several times I tried to pump her friends. They always replied: 'She is a mozita (virgin), she is right.'

Her drawing nearer to me was not even discussed. She asked nothing and granted nothing. Formerly she had been merry, but now she was grave and hardly ever spoke. What were her thoughts? What did she expect of me? It was a vain attempt to fathom her soul, or read in her eyes. I did not see any clearer through this little woman, than I could through the impenetrable eyes of a cat.

* * * * *

One night, at a sign from the manageress, she left the stage with three other dancers, and went up to the first floor to have a rest, she said. She was often absent for about an hour, of which I

thought nothing, because in spite of her being false and lying, I believed every word she said.

'When we have danced well,' she explained, 'they let us sleep a little, otherwise we would be dreaming on the stage.'

Thus she had gone upstairs once again and in order to get some fresh air, I had left the dance-hall for half an hour.

On re-entering I met, in the passage, a dancer who was somewhat simple-minded, and on that particular night a little bit tipsy; she was called la Gallega.

'You arrive too soon,' she said to me.

'Why?'

'Conchita is still up-stairs.'

'I'll wait till she wakes up. Let me pass.'

She did not seem to understand.

'Till she wakes up?'

'Surely, yes, what do you mean?'

'But she doesn't sleep.'

'She told me. . . .'

'She told you that she was going to sleep? Well, all right!'

She was going to be satisfied at that, but although she bit her lips with an effort, she could not help to burst into laughter. I was sickly pale.

'Where is she? Tell me at once,' I shouted, taking her by the arm.

'Don't hurt me, Caballero. She is showing her belly-button to some Englishmen. Lord knows it isn't my fault. If I had known, I would not have told you. I don't want to have a mix-up with any one, I am an honest girl, Caballero.'

Would you believe it? I remained thunderstruck. It was as if a cold breath out of a cellar had passed over me, but my voice was not trembling.

'Gallega, I told her, take me upstairs.'

She shook her head.

I continued:

'No one will know that you spoke to me. Be quick. . . . She is my fiancée, you understand. . . . I have the right to go upstairs . . . guide me. . . .'

And I placed a Napoleon into her hand.

A moment later, I was alone, on the balcony of an interior court and through a little spy window in the door, I saw, Sir, an infernal scene.

There was a second dance hall, smaller, well lighted, with two guitar players sitting on a platform. In the middle of the room Conchita, naked, and three other nudities danced a frenzied 'jota' in front of two Englishmen, sitting in the background.

I said naked, she was more than naked. Black stockings covered her legs right up to the top and on her feet she had sonorous little shoes which kept tapping the floor. I dared not interrupt; I was afraid I would kill her.

Alas! my dear Sir, I have never seen her so beautiful! It wasn't her eyes and fingers only: her entire body was expressive like a face, more than a face, and her head, enveloped by her luxurious hair, rested on her shoulder, like a useless thing. There was a smile in the fold of her haunch, a flushing of cheeks, when she moved her adomen; her breasts seemed to look straight ahead through two fixed, dark eyes. Never have I seen her so beautiful: the false folds of a garment alter the expression of a dancer and deviate in a counter-sense the line of exterior grace; but there, by

a revelation, I saw the gestures, the shivering, the movements of the arms, of the feet, of the lithe body, of her muscular loins, moved voluptuously by a visible force: the very chief attraction of the dance, her agile little belly.

I broke down the door . . . looking at her for ten seconds and swearing to myself that I wasn't going to kill her, was all that my willpower could do. And now nothing would hold me back any more. My sudden entry was received with piercing cries.

I went straight to Concha, telling her with a curt voice:

'Follow me. Fear not. I am not going to hurt you. But come at once or something is going to happen!'

Oh, no! She did not fear anything. She stood there, with her back against the wall, and arms outstretched to either side, she said:

'No more than Christ descended from the cross, I am not going to leave here and you are not going to touch me, because I forbid you to advance another step further than that chair. Leave me alone, Madam. Go down stairs, all of you. I need nobody; I'll take care of him!'

XI.

How everything seemed to explain itself.

They left us alone, the Englishmen having disappeared first.

Sir, up to that hour, I would have looked upon any man as a miserable being of whom I had been told that he struck a woman. And yet, at that moment, in the face of such outrageous circumstances, I could hardly contain myself not to strike at this woman. My fingers opened and closed nervously, as if they wanted to strangle a neck. I fought a mental fight between my savage anger and my willpower.

Ah, it is well a sign of the supreme feminine power, due to that immunity with which we arm them. A woman insults you to your face, she abuses you shamefully: take it smiling. She strikes you in the face: protect yourself, but do not defend yourself. She ruins you: let her do as she pleases. She cheats you: say nothing for fear to compromise her. She breaks your heart and your

very life: kill yourself, if you please! But be careful, that never, through your fault, even the most fleeting little pain should hurt these exquisite and ferocious beings, for whom the voluptuousness of causing suffering to others, exceeds even the voluptuousness of the flesh.

The Orientals do not spoil them as we do, though they are the great voluptuous ones. They have cut their fangs, in order that their looks may be sweeter. They master their ill-will so as to better unchain their sensuality. I admire them.

But for me, Concha remained invulnerable.

I did not approach her. I spoke to her three paces away from her. She was still standing against the wall, with hands crossed behind her back, her breasts bulging out and her feet pulled together, standing up straight in her long stockings, like a flower in a vase.

'Well,' I commenced, 'what have you got to say? Let's see. Invent something. Defend yourself. Lie some more. You lie so well.'

'Ah! This is superb!' she cried. 'He accuses me! He enters here like a burglar, breaking the

door and window, he threatens me, he interrupts my dance, he chases away my friends. . . .'

'Silence!'

'. . . He will perhaps chase me away from here, and for all this I am to defend myself! It is me, who has done all the wrong, is that it? This ridiculous scene, it is me, who sought it. Enough said. You are too stupid!'

And as she was perspiring from a thousand pores all over her brilliant skin, she took from a buffet a basin and sponge, and sponged and frictioned herself from her belly to the head, as if she had come out of a bath.

'So then,' I continued, 'this is what you are doing in this house where I come to see you daily. This is your "profession!" And this is the woman I love.'

'And you pretend to know nothing about it, little innocent?'

'Who, me?'

'Surely YOU, who else? Every Spaniard knows, in Paris and in Buenos-Aires everybody knows, and in Madrid even children of twelve

years can tell you that women dance all naked at the first ball in Cadiz. And YOU want to make me believe that nobody had ever told you; you, who are not married, you who have lived a bachelor's life for forty years!'

'I had forgotten.'

'Ha, ha, ha! He had forgotten. He is coming here for two months, he has seen me four times a week go upstairs, to the upper dancing hall. . . .'

'Silence, Concha! You are hurting me horribly.'

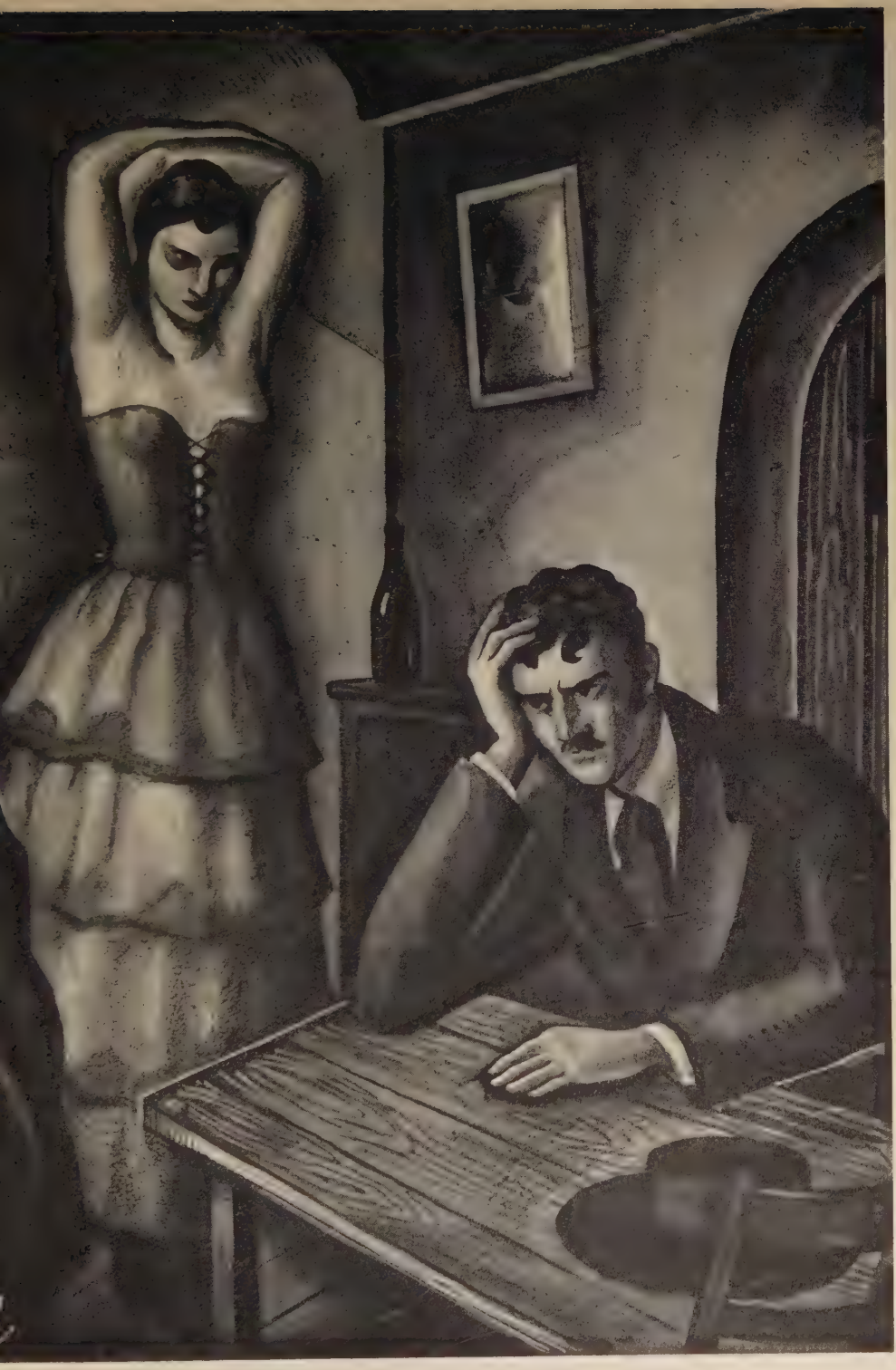
'Now it will be your turn! I shall avenge myself, Mateo, for what you have done to me tonight, because you are acting maliciously through a stupid jealousy and by what right, I ask? Who are you to treat me like that? Are you my father? No. Are you my husband? No! Are you my lover? . . .'

'Yes, I am your lover, I am!'

'Really? Well, you are content with verv little, I must say.' And she burst out laughing.

I turned pale again.

'Concha, my child, tell me, speak to me, have you another? If you have another one, I swear



that I am going to leave you. You have but to say the word.'

'I am my own and I keep to myself. I have nothing more precious than myself, Mateo. Nobody is rich enough to buy me from myself.'

'But those two men who were here a while ago. . . .'

'What else next? Do I know them?'

'Is it really true? You don't know them?'

'Most assuredly no! I don't know them. Where do you think I have met them? They are Englishmen who came here with a guide from the hotel. They are leaving to-morrow for Tangier. I have hardly compromised myself, my friend.'

'And here? Right here? . . .'

'Well, look about you: is it a bedroom? Look all over the house. Is there a bed anywhere? You have seen them yourself, Mateo. They were dressed up like mannekins, their hats on their heads, their chin supported by their canes. You are mad, I tell you, to make a scandal like this, when you have nothing whatever to reproach me with.'

If she had defended herself some more, I believe I would have held her justified. I had a craving for forgiveness but I feared to utter it.

However, one more question tortured me; I put it tremblingly:

'And the "Morenito"? . . . Concha, tell me the truth. This time I want to know. Swear to me that you will hold back nothing from me, that you will tell me all, if there is anything. I beg of you, my little one.'

'The Morenito? . . . He was in my bed this morning.'

I remained for a moment stupefied; then my arms closed on her and I strangled her, not knowing myself whether I wanted to kill her, or to steal her from some imaginary person.

She understood, and still laughing she cried:

'Let me go, Mateo. Let go! You are dangerous for a minute. You would take me by force in a fit of jealousy. Well, stay where you are! I will explain . . . my poor friend, there is no reason to tremble the way you do, I assure you.'

'You think so?'

'The Marenito lives with his two sisters Mercédes and Pipa. They are poor. For them and their brother, there is only one bed, and it isn't large. And since it is so hot, they like to sleep not so close together, after their eight hours of strenuous dancing, so they send the little one to their neighbors. This week, mama attends the perpetual adoration at the Parish church; she is not there when I am in bed; so Mercédes asked me whether there was room in my bed for her brother. I said: Yes. And there is really nothing to upset you.'

I looked at her without answering.

'Oh,' she said, 'if there is still something on your mind, calm yourself. I do not allow him any more than his sisters do, you know. Believe me, on my word. He scarcely kisses me four or five times before he goes to sleep, and then, I turn my back to him, just as if we were married.'

She pulled up her stocking on the right leg and added without haste:

'Same as if I were with you.'

The unconsciousness, the boldness, and the

brazenness of this woman finished to kill all my sentiments, leaving only moral suffering. I was still more unhappy than irresolute, so unhappy that I was near crying.

I took her on my knees, very gently, she did not object.

'My child,' I told her, 'listen to me. I cannot live any more the way I have done for a whole year, putting up with your whims. It is necessary that you speak to me with all frankness and perhaps for the last time. I suffer abominably. If you remain another day in this dance-hall and in this city, you will never see me again. Is that what you want, Conchita?'

She replied and in such a new voice that I seemed to hear another woman speaking.

'Don Mateo, you have never understood me. You have thought that you were pursuing me and that I refused myself to you, when, on the contrary, I love you and desire you with all my heart for all my life. Remember the Fábrica. Was it you, who approached me? Was it you who took me away? No. It is me, who ran after you, who

introduced you to my mother, holding you back, almost by force, as I was so much afraid that I might lose you. And the next morning . . . you remember? You came into the room. I was alone. You did not even kiss me. I still see you in the chair, sitting there with your back to the window. . . . I threw myself at you, I took your head into my hands, I hung with my lips on yours, and—I have never told you—but I was quite young then, and during that kiss, Mateo, I felt something snap in my womb for the first time in my life . . . and the pleasure of it . . . I was on your knees, like now. . . .'

I pressed her in my arms, broken down with emotion. She had reconquered me with two words. She played with me as she liked.

'I have never loved anyone, except you,' she continued, 'ever since that night in December when I saw you in that railroad car, just when I had left my convent at Avila. I loved you in the first place, because you are beautiful. You have such brilliant and tender eyes that it seemed to me, that all women would be longing to be your mistress.

Ah, if you knew how many nights I have been thinking of those eyes. Next I loved you because you are good. I would not tie my life to that of a man who is beautiful, but an egoist, for, as you know, I love myself too much to be content with only a half-happiness. I wanted perfect happiness and I saw at once, that if I asked you for it, you would give it to me.'

'But then, my dear, why this long silence?'

'Because I am not content with that which satisfies other women. Not only do I want perfect happiness, but I want it for all my life. I want to espouse you, Mateo, so that I may still love you, when you do not love me any more. Oh! Do not be afraid. We shall not go to the church, nor to the Registrar's office. I am a good Christian, but God protects the sincere lovers, and I am going to paradise before many married women get there. I am not going to ask you to marry me publicly, because I know that that cannot be done. . . . You shall never call me Doña Conception Perez de Diaz, the woman who danced naked in this horrible den where we are, before all the English who have been there. . . .'

And she burst out in tears.

'Conception, my child, calm yourself. I love you. I will do anything you like.'

'No,' she cried with a sob. 'No, I don't want to. It's an impossible thing. I do not wish to soil your name with mine. I do not accept your generosity. Mateo, we shall not be married for the world, but you will treat me like your wife and you will swear to me, that you will always keep me. I do not ask for much: only a little house of my own, close to yours. And a marriage-portion. A dowry such as you would give to the one whom you would marry legally. In exchange, I have nothing to give you, my dear. Nothing but my external love, with my virginity which I have kept for you against them all'.

XII.

Scene behind a grated door.

Never before had she spoken to me in such a sweet tone, full of emotion and feeling. I believed I had at last succeeded in separating her soul from the mask of irony and pride which she had shown to me for much too long a time and that a new life of moral convalescence was opening up to me.

(Have you ever seen at the Museum in Madrid, a peculiar picture by Goya, in the room on the first to the left on the top floor? It represents four women wearing a Spanish skirt; they are on the lawn of a garden, holding a shawl by the four corners and, laughing gayly, they keep throwing a puppet, the size of a man, up in the air. . . .)

In short, we came back to Sevilla. She had gone back to her bantering voice and that mocking smile; but I did not feel disturbed any more. A Spanish proverb says: 'The woman, like a cat, belongs to him who cares for her.' I took such

good care of her and was happy that she let me do it!

I had arrived at the point of convincing myself that her way towards me had never swerved; that she had really approached me first and seduced me little by little; that her two flights had been justified, not by the miserable calculations which I had suspected, but through my own fault, my fault, and the forgetfulness of my obligations entered into towards her. I even excused her of her indecent dance, thinking that she had despairingly given up hope that her dream to live with me would ever come true and that a virgin girl in Cadiz could not make a living without taking at least the appearances of a creature of pleasure.

Well, what am I to say? I loved her.

The day of our return, I selected for her a private house in the Calle Lucena, in the parish of San-Isidorio. It is a quiet neighborhood, almost deserted in summer, but cool and fresh, being well shaded with trees. I saw her happy in this mauve and yellow street, not far from the Calle del Candilejo, where your Carmen received Don José.

It was necessary to furnish this house. I wanted to do it quickly, but she had a thousand fancy ideas. A whole week went by in the midst of paper-hangers, decorators, and furniture dealers. It was for me like a week in preparation of a wedding. Concha became very sweet and if she still resisted it was in a gentle way, as if to keep the promise which she had made to herself. I did not rush her.

When I thought of making up in advance her dowry of a mistress-wife, I remembered her reserve on the day she had asked me for this proof of future constancy. She did not fix any figure for what she called her dowry. I feared to respond badly to her discretion and decided to give her one hundred thousand Douros, which she accepted, as if it were merely a 'piécette' (a Spanish coin).

The end of the week approached. I was consumed with impatience. No betrothed young fellow was ever wishing for his wedding night as feverishly as I did. Henceforth I did not fear any more her coquettish ways of the past; she was mine, I had read it in her eyes; I had responded

to her pure desire of a happy life without reproach. The love which she had been unable to hide to me that last night of her dancing, was now going to express itself freely for long and quiet years to come and the greatest joy was awaiting me in that white house of my wedding in the Calle Lucena.

What this long expected joy was going to be, you will hear presently.

By a caprice, which I thought was charming, she desired to enter first into her new house, to be ready for both of us and to receive me as a clandestine hostess, all alone at midnight. I arrive: the iron-grated door is closed. I ring. A few minutes later Concha came down, smiling. She wore a pink skirt, a light cream colored shawl and two large red roses in the hair. By the bright moonlight I saw every one of her features.

She approached the grate still smiling and without haste, saying:

'Kiss my hands.'

The grate remained closed.

'Now kiss the border of my skirt and the tip of my slipper.'

Her voice was beaming with pleasure.

Next she said:

'All right. And now you may go.'

A cold sweat moistened my temples. I seemed to guess all she was going to say and to do.

'Conchita, my girl. . . . You laugh. . . . Tell me you are laughing. . . .'

'Oh, yes! I laugh! I'm going to tell you, if that is all you want. I laugh! I laugh! Are you satisfied? I laugh with all my heart, listen, listen, how well I laugh! Ha! Ha! Ha! I laugh as no one has ever laughed since the laugh came first to men's lips. I am tickled to death, I am choking with laughter. Nobody has ever seen me so gay; I laugh as if I were drunk. Look well at me, Mateo, see how happy I am.'

She lifted both arms and snapped her fingers in a gesture of dancing.

'Free! I am free of you! Free for the rest of my life! Mistress of my body and of my blood! Oh, don't try to get in. The door is solid. But wait a little longer, I wouldn't be happy if I had not said all there is on my mind.'

She came still a little nearer and spoke to me, her head between her hands, with an accent of ferocity:

'Mateo, I have a horror of you. I shall never find words enough to tell you how much I hate you. If you were covered with ulcers, with filth and vermin, I would not feel any greater repulsion than when your skin touches my skin. If it pleases God, this shall be the finish right now. For fourteen months I have tried to save myself from you, from where you are, and you always take me back, your hands touch me again, your arms choke me, your lips try to find mine. How loathing. At night I spit into the street after each one of your kisses. You will never know what I felt when you came into my bed. Oh! How I have detested you. How I have prayed to God against you. I went to Holy Communion seven times last winter, to pray that you might die the day I have ruined you. May it be as God pleases, I don't care any more, I am free! I am free! Go away, Mateo, I have said it all.'

I remained motionless like a stone.

She repeated:

'Go away! Don't you understand?'

Then, as I was unable either to speak, or to move, or go away, the tongue dry and the feet frozen to the ground, she rushed towards the stairway with a sort of fury in her eyes.

'You don't want to go away,' she cried. 'You don't want to go away? Well, you shall see!'

And with a shout of triumph in her voice, she called:

'Morenito!'

My arms trembled so strongly that I shook the bars of the grate with my fists.

He was there. I saw him come downstairs.

She threw back her shawl and opened both of her naked arms to him.

'See! Here is my lover. Look how nice he is. And how young! Mateo! Look at me, watch me well: I adore him. Sweetheart, give me your mouth . . . once more . . . once more. Longer . . . How sweet my life is! I feel amorous! . . .'

She told him still a lot of other things. . . .

Finally, as if she thought that my torture was

not yet complete . . . she . . . I hardly dare tell you, Sir, she gave herself to him. . . right there . . . before my eyes . . . at my feet . . . I still have in my ears the agonizing humming, the screams of joy and pleasure which made her mouth tremble while mine was choking—and the tantalizing accent of her voice when she threw this last phrase at me while she got up:

'The guitar is mine, I play on it to whom I like!'

XIII.

How Mateo received a visit and what followed.

If I did not kill myself on entering my home, it was doubtless, because an energetic wrath upheld and advised me in this state of a ruined existence.

Incapable of sleeping, I did not even go to bed. Daybreak found me still awake and walking up and down the room in which we are, from the windows to the door. Passing in front of a mirror, I noticed without surprise, that the hair on my head had turned gray.

In the morning they served me a breakfast of some kind on a table in the garden. I had been sitting there, without appetite, without suffering, without thinking, when I saw coming to me through the alley, like a dream, Concha.

Oh! Don't be surprised. Nothing is incredible where she is concerned. Every one of her actions is always sudden, stupefying, wicked! While she came towards me, I asked myself what greed

pushed her now, or whether it was just the desire to contemplate once more her triumph in the wreck she had wrought, or whether she came once more to complete, to her benefit, my material ruin. The one or the other explanation was equally likely.

She bent down to pass underneath the branch of a tree, closed her umbrella and her fan and sat down in front of me, placing her right hand on my table.

I remember that behind her was a mass of masonry and a shining shovel, stuck into the ground. During the long silence which followed, the temptation obsessed me to seize the shovel, to throw the woman on the lawn and to cut her in two, like a worm. . . .

'I came,' she said finally, 'to see whether you were dead. I thought that you loved me more and that you had killed yourself in the night.'

Next she poured the chocolate into my cup, put it to her mobile lips and added as if she were talking to herself:

'Not cooked well enough. It is bad.'

After that she rose, opened her umbrella and said to me:

'Let us go indoors, I have a surprise for you.'

I thought to myself: And so have I.

I did not open my mouth.

We walked up the stairway from the garden. She ran up in advance singing an air of 'zarzuela' (musical drama) with a slowness which was surely meant to bring the allusion all the better home to me:

'Y si a mi diese la gana
De que fueras del brazo con el?
—Pues iria con el de verbena
Y a los toros de Carabanchel!'

'If I do not want you to go
Arm in arm with him,
Well, *I* will go with him to the fair
And to the Bullfight at Carabanchel!"

Of her own accord she entered into a room . . . it was not me, Sir, who had pushed her there and what followed is not what I intended. . . . Our destiny was thus made. . . . It had to come.

I shall presently show you the room into which she entered; it is a small room, well hung with tapestry, dark and soundproof like a grave and without any other furniture than a couple of couches. I used it formerly as a smoking room. Now it is abandoned.

I went in after her. I closed the door, locking it with the key, without her hearing me turn that key; then I saw red. A wrath which had accumulated for fourteen months, day by day, had the better of me; I turned and knocked her down with a heavy slap in the face.

It was the first time that I had struck a woman. It caused me to tremble as much as she did; she had fallen backward, with a stupefied look and chattering teeth.

'You, YOU, Mateo. . . . You do this to me. . . .'

And in the midst of violent insults she cried:

'No fear! You are not going to touch me twice.'

She put her hand to her garter, where many women hide a small weapon. I gripped her hand and forced her to drop it on the floor, then seized

the knife and threw it into a corner. Next I made her kneel down, seized her two hands into my left and said:

'Concha, you are not going to hear from me neither insults nor reproaches. Listen: you have made me suffer beyond human endurance. You have invented moral tortures in order to try them on the only man who has ever loved you passionately. I declare to you now that I am going to possess you by force, and not only once, do you hear me? but as many times as it pleases me to seize you before nightfall.'

'Never! Never! shall I be yours,' she cried. 'I have a horror of you, I told you that. I hate you like death. I hate you even more than death. Murder me then! You are not going to have me before!'

Thereupon I began striking her in silence. . . . I had become mad. . . . I do not remember exactly what happened; my eyes only saw red . . . and my head did not think any more. . . . I only remember that I struck her with the regularity of a farmer who is threshing corn with a flail—and

always in the same direction, on the top of the head and on the left shoulder. I never heard such horrible cries. . . .

This lasted about a quarter of an hour. She had not uttered a word, neither to ask me to stop, nor to let her alone. I stopped only after my fist began to hurt and then I let go her two hands.

She fell on her side, with outstretched arms, head thrown back, the hair dishevelled, and her cries suddenly turned into sobs. She cried like a little girl, always in the same tone, as long as she could without taking a breath. At some moments I thought she was going to choke. I still see the movement which she made with her sore shoulder and her hands in her hair, taking the pins out. . . .

Then I had pity on her and felt ashamed, almost forgetting for the moment the atrocious scene of the evening before. . . . Concha had raised herself a little, she was still on her knees, her hands on her cheeks, her eyes lifted up to me. It seemed that there was not a semblance of a reproach in those eyes, but . . . I don't know how to put it . . . some sort of adoration. . . . At first her lips trem-

bled so much that she could not articulate. . . . Then I made out weakly:

'Oh, Mateo, how you love me!'

She approached, still on her knees and murmured: 'Pardon, Mateo! Pardon! I love you also. . . .'

For the first time she was sincere. But I did not believe her any more. She continued:

'How well you have beaten me, sweatheart. How sweet it was. It felt good. Pardon for all I have done to you! I was foolish! I didn't know. . . Then you have suffered much for me? . . . Pardon! Pardon! Pardon! Mateo!'

Then she added with the same sweet voice:

'You need not take me by force. I await you in my arms. Help me to get up. . . . I told you that I had reserved a surprise for you. Well, you will see presently: I am still a virgin. Last night's scene was nothing but a comedy, to hurt you. . . . I can tell you now: I hardly loved you, until today. But I was much too proud to take a Morenito. I am yours, Mateo. I shall be your wife this morning, if it pleases God. Try to forget the

past and to understand my poor little soul. I believe that I am going to wake up. I see you as I have never seen you before. Come to me.'

And indeed, Sir, she was a virgin. . . .

This would make a fine finish for a novel; all would be well with such a conclusion. But alas! Why cannot I stop there? You will perhaps know it some day: a misfortune never obliterates itself in the course of a human existence: a wound never heals; never a feminine hand that has sown anguish and tears, will know how to cultivate joy and happiness in the same torn-up soil.

Eight days after that morning (I say eight days, which is not long, to be sure), Concha came home one Sunday evening a few minutes before dinner, and said:

'Guess whom I have seen? Someone whom I love well. . . . Try to guess. . . . I was well pleased.'

I said nothing.

'I have seen the Morenito,' she continued. 'He passed along the las Sierpas, in front of the Gas-

quet Store. We went together to the Brewery-Restaurant. You know, I spoke badly of him to you, but I did not say all I thought. He is pretty, my little friend of Cadiz. You know him very well; you have seen him. He has brilliant eyes with long lashes; I adore long lashes, they make the looks so impressive! And then he has no mustaches, he has a well formed mouth, splendid white teeth. . . . All women pass their tongue over their lips on seeing him so nice and gentle.

'You are joking, Conchita . . . it is not possible. . . . You have not seen anybody, tell me?'

'Ah, you don't believe me? As you like it. . . . Then I won't tell you what happened afterwards.'

'Tell me at once!' I cried, shaking her by the arm.

'Oh! don't get angry! I will tell you! Why should I not? It is my pleasure and I take it when I find it. We went together outside the town "por un caminito muy clarito, muy clarito, muy clarito," to the Cruz del Campo. . . . Shall I continue? We looked all over the house to find the coziest room with the nicest couch. . . .'

And as I got up, she finished, protecting herself with her two hands:

'It is quite natural. He has such a velvety skin and he is so much younger and nicer than you!'

What do you want me to say? I struck her once more, and brutally with a hard fist, in such a way that it was revolting to myself. She cried, she sobbed, she fell down on her knees in a corner, her head on her knees, wringing her hands.

And then, as soon as she could speak, she said with a voice full of tears:

'Sweetheart, it is not true. . . . I went to the bull-fight. . . . I spent all day there, the ticket is in my pocket . . . take it. . . I was alone with your friend G. . . and his wife. They spoke to me, they will confirm it. . . . I have seen them kill six steers; I never left my place and I came straight home.'

'Then why did you lie?'

'That you should strike me, Mateo. When I feel your strength I love you, I love you; you have no idea how happy I am to cry because of you. Come now. Console me quick. . . .

And so it went on, Sir, up to the end. When

she had convinced herself that her imaginary confessions did not stir me up any more and that I had every reason to believe in her fidelity, she invented new pretexts to arouse my wrath daily. And at night, when all women say: Love me, love me always. . . . I heard such stupefying phrases (and I do not invent anything, mind!): 'Mateo, you will beat me again, will you? Promise me, that you will beat me well. Kill me! Say that you will kill me!'

Do not believe, however, that this singular predilection was the basis of her character: no; if she needed the chastisement, she also had the passion of doing wrong. She *did* wrong, not for the passion of sinning, but for the pleasure of hurting some one. Her part in life limited itself to sowing suffering and in seeing it grow.

At first there were jealousies of which you cannot have any idea. She was jealous of my friends, of every person of my acquaintance, she spread rumors, and if necessary, showed herself so insulting, that as a result, I broke with every one and soon remained alone, without a friend. The sight

of a woman, no matter of what personality, was sufficient to put her into a fury. She discharged every one of my servants, from the lowliest kitchen help to the cook, although she knew perfectly well that I never spoke to them. Next she sent away the servants of her own choosing. I was induced to change all my tradesmen, because the wife of the barber was a blonde, because the daughter of the librarian was a brunette, and because the sales girl in the tobacco store asked me how I felt when I entered her store. I stopped by and by to go to the theatre, because when I looked around at the orchestra and boxes, it was to enjoy the beauty of some woman, if I looked at the stage, it was a positive proof that I was amorous of an actress. For the same reasons I ceased to show myself in public with her: the slightest greeting became for her a sort of declaration. I could not look over engravings, read a novel, or glance at a virgin, without being accused of having tender regards for the model of the heroine, or of the Madonna. And I always gave in; I loved her so much! But after such irksome fights!

At the same time while practicing her jealousy against me, she did her best to stir up mine, by means which were at first fictitious, but soon became real.

She deceived me. From the care she took in advising me every time, I recognized that she did not look so much for her own emotion, but rather for mine, but even morally, this was not an excuse for such behavior, and at all events, when she came back from her particular adventures, I was not inclined to vindicate her, you understand that readily.

Soon it was not sufficiently satisfactory for her to bring me the proofs of her infidelities. She wanted to renew the scene of the grated door, and this time without any feint. Yes! She plotted against herself a surprise, in the very act! One fine morning, I woke up rather late. I did not see her alongside of me, but there was a letter on the table which contained these few lines:

'Mateo, who does not love me any more! I got up while you slept and I have gone to revisit my lover, Hotel X. . . Room No. 6; you may kill

me there if you like, the door will not be locked. I shall enjoy my night of love till around noon. Come along! You may have a chance of seeing me at the very moment of an embrace.

I adore you!

Concha.'

I went there. And what an hour I spent there, my God! A duel followed. It was a public scandal. You may have heard of it. . . .

And when I come to think that all this was done 'to attach me closer' to her!—It is marvelous to what point the imagination of erotic women may blind them!

What I saw in that hotel room came henceforth like a veil between Concha and me. Instead of stirring up my desire, as she had hoped, this souvenir exhaled all over her body something odious and ineffaceable with which she remained impregnated. Yet, I took her back, but my love for her was forever galled. Our quarrels became more frequent, harsher and more brutal also. She hung on to me with a sort of fury, it was pure egotism and personal passion. Her soul, fundamentally

bad, did not even dream that one could love otherwise. At any price, by every means, she wanted to entice me into the close embrace of her arms.

Finally I escaped.

It happened one day, suddenly, after one scene like a thousand others, simply because it was inevitable.

A little gypsy girl, selling baskets, had come up the back stairway, from the garden, to offer me her poor handiwork of plaited reeds. I was about to give her some alms, when I saw Concha rush up to her and tell her with a hundred insults, that she had been there already the previous month, that she was doubtless offering something else besides her little baskets, that her very eyes showed her true trade and if she went barefoot, it was merely to show her legs, and that one must be very shameless to go like that from door to door with a torn skirt, to hunt up amorous men. To all this she added outrageous names, which I do not repeat. Then she took away from the child all her merchandise, broke it up and trampled it under foot. . . . I leave you to guess the bitter sobs

and the trembling of the poor little thing. Of course I indemnified her for the loss of her wares. Hence resulted a battle.

The scene of that day was no more violent, nor more execrable, than any of the previous ones: however, it was the end. I don't know why, but it was. 'You are leaving me for a Bohemian kid!'

'No, I am leaving you for the sake of peace.'

Three days later I was in Tangier. She came to join me. I left with a caravan into the interior, where she could not follow me, and I remained several months without any news from Spain. When I came back to Tangier, I found fourteen letters from her at the post-office. I took a steamer to Italy. There were eight more letters. Then silence.

I did not come back to Sevilla till after a year of roaming about. She was married two weeks previously to a young idiot, of a good family, whom she had sent to Bolivia, with significant haste. In her last letter she said:

'I shall be yours alone, or else to whosoever wants me.' I imagine that she is now well on the road to keep her second promise.

I have told you all, Sir. You now know Conception Perez. My life has been broken and ruined because I have found her crossing my way. I expect nothing more of her, except forgetfulness, but an experience so dearly acquired, should and must be taken as a lesson in case of danger.

Pray, do not wonder if it was in my heart to speak to you the way I have done. The Carnival died yesterday; normal life has recommenced again; I have lifted to you for a moment the mask of an unknown woman.

* * * * *

"I thank you," said André gravely, pressing both hands of his host.

XV.

The conclusion and the moral of this story.

André went back to town on foot. It was seven o'clock in the evening. The transformation of the scenery came about insensibly by an enchanting moonlight.

In order not to return the same way—or for any other reason—André took the Empalme road, after a long detour across country.

The South wind elated him with its never failing warmth which, at this already nocturnal hour, was still more voluptuous. And as he stopped, with eyes closed, to better enjoy this new sensation with a shiver, a carriage crossed his way and stopped suddenly.

He advanced, as he was being spoken to.

"I am a little late," murmured a voice, "but you are very kind; you have waited for me. Lovely stranger, who attracts me, may I trust myself to you on this deserted and dark road? Ah, Lord! you see, I am hardly inclined to die tonight."

André glanced at her with a look which revealed an entire destiny; then, having turned pale, he took the seat beside her.

The carriage rolled towards the country to a little green house which stood in the shadow of three olive trees. The horses were detached. They slept. Next morning at about three they were harnessed again. The carriage started for Sevilla and stopped at 22 Plaza del Triunfo.

Concha got out first. André followed. They entered together. "Rosalie!" she shouted to a chamber maid. "Pack my trunks. I am going to Paris."

"Madame, there came this morning a gentleman, asking for you, and he insisted very much on entering the house. I do not know him, but he said that Madam has known him for a long time and that he would be happy if Madam would receive him."

"Did he leave a card?"

"No, Madam."

But at that moment a servant had arrived, bearing a letter, and André knew later that the letter contained the following lines:

"My dear Conchita: I forgive you. I cannot live without you. Come back. It is me this time, who entreats you on his knees. I kiss your naked feet.

"Mateo."